



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Justice Committee
Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Ture

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2024/25 Estimates for Vote Corrections

Presented to the House of Representatives
by James Meager, Chairperson

Contents

Recommendation.....	3
About Vote Corrections	3
Funding sought in 2024/25	3
Trends in the Vote	3
Budget savings over the next four years	4
Waikeria Prison.....	4
Increased capacity to house prisoners.....	4
Reduced capacity of mental health unit	5
Design of prison for gang management.....	5
Budget allocation for staff recruitment and retention	5
Extension of programmes to remand prisoners	6
Adherence to minimum legal requirements	6
Improvements to safety of frontline officers	7
Relationship between Māori and the Government.....	7
Other matters considered.....	8
Appendix.....	9

Vote Corrections

Recommendation

The Justice Committee recommends that the appropriations for the year ending 30 June 2025 for Vote Corrections, as set out in Parliamentary Paper B.5 Vol.6, be accepted.

About Vote Corrections

The Minister of Corrections is responsible for all the appropriations in Vote Corrections. Funding under the Vote is administered by the Department of Corrections—Ara Poutama Aotearoa. The department is responsible for managing custodial and community-based sentences, providing rehabilitation and reintegration services, and offering support and information to victims.

As of 31 March 2024, the total prison population was 9,508. A further 30,600 people were serving community-based sentences and orders.

We met with Hon Mark Mitchell, Minister of Corrections, to discuss this Vote.

Funding sought in 2024/25

In 2024/25, the appropriations sought for Vote Corrections total \$2,653.9 million. This is \$88.9 million (3.4 percent) more than the estimated actual expenditure in 2023/24 of \$2,565 million.

The three largest appropriations are:

- *Public Safety is Improved*—just over \$1,979 million for prison-based custodial services, sentences and orders served in the community, and services to the Parole Board and victims of crime
- *Re-offending is Reduced*—about \$397 million for providing rehabilitation interventions, reintegration, and support services
- *Capital expenditure*—just over \$264 million for the purchase or development of assets.

There are several notable changes compared with Budget 2023. Funding for public safety increases by nearly \$138 million, as new funding for the increasing prisoner population and frontline remuneration pressures. Capital expenditure decreases by \$53.4 million. This is linked to the near-completion of the current Waikeria Prison development. Funding for policy advice has also decreased by \$2.6 million because of time limited funding for the development of a sector-wide strategy and operating model to improve outcomes for the victims of crime.

Trends in the Vote

For comparison, the following table shows the amount sought in Budget 2024 against spending over the previous three years.

	2021/22 Actual \$million	2022/23 Actual \$million	2023/24 Estimated Actual \$million	2024/25 Estimates sought \$million
	2,181	2,260	2,565.0	2,653.9
% increase or (decrease)		3.6	13.5	3.4

Budget savings over the next four years

Budget 2024 indicates that Corrections has found savings of \$441.99 million over four years. The Minister expressed confidence that budget cuts would not be detrimental to the operational functions of the corrections system. He emphasised that the purpose of the Government's cost-savings process was to identify where savings could be made, but also where those savings could be redistributed to front-line functions. The Minister told us he wanted to optimise the services and programmes available to people in custody or serving a community-based sentence to ensure that they would have the "best possible chance of reintegrating and being successful when they leave Corrections".

The Government proposes to save about \$68 million over the next four years from spending on the stewardship and management of assets. This includes reducing levels of planned asset maintenance and reviewing lease arrangements. We asked whether these savings would adversely affect the quality of departmental assets. Corrections told us it considers that the risk from deferring maintenance is within acceptable tolerance.

We asked how the disestablishment of 107 back-office roles reconciled with savings of around \$172 million over four years. The ministry explained that the cost savings also included an extensive review of the back office, which considered secondments, vacancies, fixed-term agreements, and contractors. Corrections claimed that it was confident cuts to the back office would not lead to failures to meet agreed performance measures.

We also expressed concern over budget cuts to the High Impact Innovation Programme and sought the reason behind the scaling back of this joint initiative across the justice sector. The department said the programme is currently under review. This was a decision by the Justice Sector Leadership Board to ensure that sector resources are managed efficiently and effectively.

Waikeria Prison

Increased capacity to house prisoners

The Minister told us that as part of Budget 2024 a further 810 beds would be added to Waikeria Prison. We asked whether these additional beds would be enough to cover the current shortfall in prison capacity and increase in crime. The Minister said it was hard to predict the response to the Government's lower-tolerance policies, but said the extra capacity is important as public safety is central to the Government's law and order policy.

The department said there is always some uncertainty with justice sector projections, but currently the prison population is particularly volatile, with fluctuations of up to 30 percent. The role of Corrections is to respond to this variation. It is prepared for the likelihood of an increasing prisoner population. Investing in the infrastructure of the prison network is one way to respond. Upgraded infrastructure is also more conducive to rehabilitative outcomes for prisoners.

Some of us questioned the decision by the Government to remove targets for reducing prisoner numbers, commenting that increased capacity simply meant there would be more people in prison. The Minister said the Government would like to see a continued decrease in the number of people entering the justice system. However, it is not prepared to risk increased harm to the public's safety because of a prisoner reduction target.

Some of us also expressed concern that the funding for an increasing prison population could be better spent on prevention through better housing, education, and employment opportunities. The Minister agreed that this would be desirable in a perfect world. As it is, he said it is important to respond to the human and economic cost of violent offending, which underpins the decision to invest in public safety through increased prisoner capacity. He acknowledged that social investment is also needed to provide support to those at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

Reduced capacity of mental health unit

We expressed concern about the proposed decrease in funding for the planned mental health unit at Waikeria Prison. We asked whether the decrease was a result of the fiscal savings requirements imposed by the Government. The department told us that approximately 60 percent of the prison population has a high level of mental health and addiction needs. We heard that Corrections triangulates data from several sources to understand how to provide efficient and optimal mental health and addiction services and support. The data demonstrates the need to provide comprehensive mental health and addiction services for 52 of the proposed 96 beds, and a lesser service for the remaining 44 beds. This reflects the reduction of funding from \$24 million to \$12 million.

Design of prison for gang management

We are interested in how the design of the new Waikeria Prison extension will take into account best practice in the management of gang members in prison. We heard from Corrections that the design work has not yet been completed. However, the department has invested heavily in managing the placement of gang members in the prison system and disrupting gang recruitment activities.

The Minister added that, during his prison visits, he observed the department being proactive in deterring gang recruitment. During a recent visit, he noted the housing of young prisoners with older, more mature individuals who are not gang members. This provides an opportunity to shield young offenders from gang influence and recruitment.

Budget allocation for staff recruitment and retention

We are aware that Corrections has faced difficulties with retention and recruitment, and note that an additional \$205 million over five years is proposed, to address "critical frontline

remuneration pressures”.¹ Funding in 2024/25 would be \$43.34 million. The department explained that the \$205 million comprised two parts: funding allocated for the collective employment agreement finalised in 2023 and contracts linked to frontline remuneration and public–private partnerships.

We heard that the department’s recent recruitment campaigns have been successful. Since the launch of a refreshed campaign in February 2024, it has received over 17,000 corrections officer applications, 419 new officers have commenced employment, and staff turnover has returned to pre-pandemic levels. The department aims to recruit and train a further 685 frontline staff, including 470 corrections officers.

Of the 470 unfilled vacancies at the end of March, 200 are vacancies for the section of Waikeria Prison that is set to open in 2025. However, the Budget has not included remuneration funding for staffing the Waikeria Prison extension. We commented on the remote nature of Waikeria and the ability to employ sufficient staff numbers. We heard that Corrections is working to find solutions for Waikeria’s remoteness and long-distance commutes for staff.

Extension of programmes to remand prisoners

The Minister told us that \$78 million has been put aside as a “tagged contingency” to implement the Government’s proposal to extend rehabilitation programmes to people on remand, so they do not have to wait until they are sentenced before they can begin on a rehabilitation pathway.

We asked about the timeline for implementing the extension of rehabilitation programmes. The Minister stressed that if the Corrections Amendment Bill is passed, accused remand prisoners would gain access to non-offence-based programmes, while convicted remand prisoners would become eligible for rehabilitative programmes. Corrections stated that it would not “rule out any sooner than the start of the next financial year”.

Corrections told us it is satisfied it has the human infrastructure to provide rehabilitation programmes for both sentenced and remand convicted prisoners. However, it faces challenges around the need to relocate prisoners to other facilities to accommodate their rehabilitation needs. This stems from the pressure placed on the system by an increasing remand population at certain facilities.

Adherence to minimum legal requirements

We explored whether the increased funding allocated to Vote Corrections would restore complete adherence to minimum legal entitlements for prisoners after the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Corrections told us it takes its “responsibilities for caring for and managing prisoners really seriously”. We heard that the department measures its performance against minimum legal requirement metrics each month.

Corrections noted that all 18 prison sites are open for in-person visits. However, we heard that Christchurch Men’s Prison and Rimutaka Prison are not meeting the requirement for all

¹ [Budget 2024 Summary of Initiatives](#), B.19, p 26.

people in prison to be entitled to at least one visit each week for at least 30 minutes. After consulting prisoners at Christchurch Men's Prison, Corrections found that prisoners preferred a 60-minute visit once a fortnight, as this better suited their families. We heard that prisoners are receiving the minimum entitlement to one hour of exercise per day, barring exceptional circumstances.

We explored the department's policy on double-bunking. We heard that many of Corrections' newer facilities have much larger cells, with a private bathroom, that are designed to house two people. Corrections has a risk assessment process for shared accommodation, which assesses the suitability of two prisoners cohabiting a single cell. In cells that have not been designed for double-bunking, it endeavours to keep the spare bunk vacant as a disaster recovery bed in the event that a facility is lost because of a natural disaster.

Improvements to safety of frontline officers

We expressed interest in what improvements could be made to the safety of frontline corrections officers over the next 12 months. The Minister emphasised that one of his priorities for this portfolio is to reduce assaults on frontline staff, which he feels are at an unacceptable level. We heard that the rate of serious assaults has remained stable, while moderate to minor assaults have decreased over the past 2–3 years.

Corrections added that it is working closely with stakeholders to improve the safety of frontline officers. Health and safety frameworks have embedded protocols around violence, aggression, and psychological demands. Corrections said it has recently invested in employing de-escalation and negotiation experts. All new frontline officers and existing staff receive training from these experts. Investments in other areas include:

- site emergency response teams
- detector dogs and intelligence capabilities
- collaboration with Police to manage conflict among gang members
- revision of the Joint Violence and Aggression Action Plan
- training in working at heights.²

Relationship between Māori and the Government

Some of us noted that the imprisonment rate of Māori has been far too high for decades. Of the 810 new beds proposed for Waikeria Prison, 410 would likely be occupied by Māori. We asked the Minister for evidence that the Government is committed to reducing the Māori prison population. The Minister acknowledged that the Government cannot resolve this issue without the involvement of strong Māori leadership. He considers that Corrections has established deep relationships with iwi and hapū. The department provides a range of cultural programmes for people managed by the corrections system. On the positive side, the Minister noted that the number of Māori in the system is starting to trend downward. However, he added that Māori are also overrepresented as victims of crime, and said the drivers of this also need to be addressed.

² Working at Heights training ensures qualified staff can be deployed in response to any event involving a prisoner at height. This training was implemented in response to the riot at Waikeria Prison in 2021.

Some of us questioned whether the relationship between the Crown and Māori would remain strong when references to te Tiriti o Waitangi had been removed from legislation, as Government members proposed with the Corrections Amendment Bill. The Minister told us that Treaty provisions were being removed as part of the coalition agreement. He commented that Treaty provisions have never been in the Act, and this has never been a barrier to the department's strong working relationships with iwi Māori.

Corrections emphasised that the department's Hōkai Rangi strategy has a core focus on reducing reoffending by Māori and working to ensure the corrections system achieves what iwi would want it to. Corrections added that it is currently refreshing the strategy but is committed to continuing it and retaining the central elements. The strategy's future iteration will focus on embedding lessons from the past five years.

Other matters considered

- We considered the procurement process for the 810-bed extension at Waikeria Prison. We heard that commercial negotiations would commence soon and could not be publicly discussed. (*See transcript pp. 3-4.*)
- We discussed whether community-based sentences and electronic monitoring would increase or decrease in the near and distant future. Corrections told us that electronic monitoring is an important feature of the criminal justice system. Officials expect an increase in the use of electronic monitoring. (*See transcript pp. 27-28.*)
- We expressed concern about any mixing between remand and sentenced prisoners. We heard that accused remand prisoners would only access non-offense-based programmes, so they would not mix with sentenced prisoners. However, people on remand who have been convicted but not yet sentenced can mix with sentenced prisoners for rehabilitative purposes. (*See transcript p. 28.*)
- We are interested in the department's policy towards transgender prisoners. Corrections told us that it assesses the most suitable and safe placement for the individual that reflects the gender they identify with. (*See transcript p. 29.*)
- We raised the issue of help given to prisoners on release, asking whether the Steps to Freedom payment, long set at \$350, would be increased. The Minister said he is currently in discussions about barriers to reintegration. (*See transcript p. 32.*)

Appendix

Committee procedure

We met on 18 June, 25 July, and 1 August 2024 to consider Vote Corrections. We heard evidence from the Minister of Corrections, Hon Mark Mitchell, and the Department of Corrections for 90 minutes, and received advice from the Office of the Auditor-General.

Committee members

James Meager (Chairperson)
Hon Ginny Andersen
Jamie Arbuckle
Cameron Brewer
Tākuta Ferris
Paulo Garcia
Dr Tracey McLellan
Rima Nakhle
Tamatha Paul
Todd Stephenson
Hon Dr Duncan Webb

Greg O'Connor participated in some of our consideration of this item of business.

Related resources

In addition to the standard Estimates documents, we considered the following documents as evidence and advice. They are available on the [Parliament website](#), along with the [Hansard transcript](#) and [recordings of our meeting on 18 June 2024](#).

- Standard Estimates Questionnaire responses (Vote Corrections).
- Minister of Corrections (Responses to additional questions).
- Office of the Auditor-General (Briefing on Vote Corrections).