

Written evidence submitted by the Prisoners' Education Trust (FPP0024)

1) About Prisoners' Education Trust

1.1 Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) is an independent charity that offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison across England and Wales. We offer 125 different courses - including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses - and enable 1,400 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures. Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to access distance learning courses in prison are more likely to get a job within one year of release and are less likely to reoffend within one year of release than otherwise similar prisoners who PET does not support.¹ PET also uses policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show policymakers and the public the impact that education can have for people in prison.

2) Introduction

2.1 PET welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. Enabling people in prison to access education that meets their needs is key to rehabilitation, increasing the likelihood that they will secure employment on release, reducing the chance that they will reoffend, and improving wellbeing. As the prison population continues to increase, and the prison estate adapts to accommodate this, it will be essential to ensure that the provision of education is prioritised.

3) The role of education in prison

3.1 Education in prison gives individuals the skills that they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. It also builds social capital and improves the wellbeing of prisoners, both during their sentences and once released. Education is the engine of rehabilitation and can make a real and substantial difference, providing people with skills, qualifications and attributes that will help them on release.

3.2 There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the benefits of prison education, particularly in relation to its impact on reoffending and employment post-release.² Research carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Justice regarding prison learners, for example, showed that they were significantly more likely to be in employment than non-learners one year after release. It also found that people who had participated in education in prison were significantly less likely to reoffend within 12 months of release.³ These findings are reinforced by the most comprehensive international study, published by the RAND Corporation, which found that prison education reduces the risk of reoffending by 13%.⁴

¹ <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/01/government-research-impact-of-prison-education-goes-beyond-finding-work/>

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0264550517699290>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf

⁴ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

4) Response to the inquiry's Terms of Reference

What changes are expected in the size and composition of the prison population in the short, medium and long term?

- 4.1 The educational needs of people in prison are acute. People who arrive in prison complete an initial assessment to ascertain their levels of literacy and numeracy. In 2022-23, the results of two-thirds of initial assessments - 68% of maths assessments and 65% of English assessments - were at Entry Level 3 or below. Entry Level 3 is the literacy and numeracy level you would normally expect of somebody leaving primary school. For English, the results of around one in six (17%) initial assessments - nearly 10,000 people - were at Entry Level 1, the literacy level normally expected of someone aged 5-7.⁵
- 4.2 These levels are worse than in previous years - in 2021-22, 66% of maths assessment and 61% of English assessments were at Entry Level 3 or below and in 2020-21 it was 64% and 56% respectively.⁶ While it is too early to say if this is an ongoing trend, it is certainly the case that people in prison need to be able to access education to address low levels of literacy and numeracy. As the prison population increases the volume of education classes and courses available will therefore also need to increase. There also needs to be a greater focus on supporting people with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy, who may not be ready for the provision currently offered in prison via the Prison Education Framework contracts.
- 4.3 Furthermore, average sentence lengths have increased in recent years with more people in prison serving long sentences. This trend is likely to continue and education provision in prison therefore needs to adapt accordingly. While the provision of literacy and numeracy classes remains essential, there also needs to be more opportunities for people serving long sentences to progress in their education beyond Level 2 (building on the opportunities provided by PET through distance learning). This should include scrapping the 'six year rule', which prevents people in prison from accessing a student loan for higher education until six years before they are due to be released. This was a recommendation of the Education Select Committee in the 2022 report of their inquiry into prison education⁷ and has previously been recommended by PET and by the Open University and the Higher Education Policy Institute.⁸
- 4.4 In addition, the number of people in prison on remand has increased significantly in recent years. While it is hoped that this will reduce again over time, as the court backlog is tackled, in the meantime thought needs to be given as to how to enable people on prison to access education if they want to (as discussed in the Justice Select Committee's recent report on adult custodial remand⁹). This should include making shorter courses available for people on remand. It should also be recognised, however, that some people are now

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2022-to-2023>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2021-2022>

⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

⁸ https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Policy-Note-18--Student-loans-for-those-on-long-prison-sentences_FINAL1.pdf

⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33530/documents/182421/default/>

spending years on remand and would therefore benefit from having the option to access mainstream prison education and training provision.

To what extent has the activation of Operation Safeguard and the rolling out of Rapid Deployment Cells helped to manage capacity pressures?

- 4.5 While Rapid Deployment Cells (RDCs) may be a relatively quick way to increase a prison's capacity, to date there have not been commensurate increases in the size or capacity of prison education departments, workshops or other education or training opportunities. As a result, a smaller proportion of people in the prison will be able to access education. It is therefore essential that where RDCs are added to a prison, additional resources are also provided to expand the availability of education.
- 4.6 In addition, adding RDCs to existing prisons stretches prison officers and other staff capacity even more thinly, making existing staff shortages worse and having a negative impact on the prison regime. As set out in PET's evidence to the Justice Select Committee's inquiry on the prison operational workforce, current staff shortages are already having a significant impact on the delivery of prison education, compromising the ability of prisons to deliver effective rehabilitation.¹⁰ More use of RDCs will only exacerbate this issue.

What are the implications of the rise in the prison population for the resources required to manage prisons safely and effectively?

- 4.7 Prison education, which is essential to effective rehabilitation, is already chronically underfunded. This was recognised, for example, in the 2022 report of the Education Select Committee's inquiry on prison education, which noted that "prison education is in a perilous state due to a continual decline in funding."¹¹
- 4.8 As a result of this real terms decrease in funding levels in recent years, the number of courses undertaken by people in prison has decreased. In 2014-15, 101,600 people in prison participated in a course. By 2019-20, before the impact of the Covid pandemic, this number had fallen to 67,663. In 2022-23 it was 63,744. The number of people participating in a functional skills course¹² in prison has followed a similar pattern, with 39,300 people participating in 2014-15 compared to 30,168 in 2019-20 and 28,832 in 2022-23.
- 4.9 It will only be possible to reverse these reductions in participation in education by significantly increasing the funding available for prison education. And if the population continues to increase, even more funding will be needed to meet demand. As well as more funding for education providers, this will also need to include investment in classrooms, digital provision and other educational resources, as discussed below.

What is HM's Prison and Probation Service's current capacity to manage overcrowding safely and effectively?

- 4.10 Prison overcrowding creates significant problems for the delivery of prison education. Firstly, with prisons holding more people than they were designed

¹⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/116042/html/>

¹¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

¹² Primarily English and Maths, but also IT and English for Speakers of Other Languages.

for, education departments are unlikely to have the capacity needed. If prisons are going to be expected to hold more people on an ongoing basis, then prison education departments (and other facilities such as workshops and libraries) need to be expanded accordingly.

- 4.11 Furthermore, the lack of headroom in the prison estate, and the need to manage population pressures, increases the risk that people will need to be moved around the prison estate, often at short notice. These decisions do not usually take into account their educational needs or their participation in a course. This is particularly problematic when a learner is part-way through a course that is not offered at the receiving prison. Starting a course and then not being able to complete it can be particularly disheartening for learners and make it less likely that they will want to participate in education in the future.
- 4.12 In addition, PET provides access to distance learning for people in prison. With people spending more time in their cells now than used to be the case pre-Covid, this can be an effective way for people in prison to access education. But if cells designed for one person actually hold two people, it can be difficult for learners to find a quiet, suitable place to study. This will have an impact on their ability to progress with and complete courses, gaining the skills and qualifications that they need to secure employment on release.
- 4.13 PET has also noted the recent proposal from the Ministry of Justice to rent prison space abroad.¹³ While we await details of how this would work in practice, it will be important to consider how education would be delivered in these circumstances. It would, for example, be important to look at how to recruit, retain and support teachers in prisons abroad and how to maintain partnerships with employers to inform the curriculum and provide vocational training. In addition, prison education is inspected by Ofsted in England and Estyn in Wales, working alongside HM Inspectorate of Prisons. Arrangements would need to be made to enable the inspection of education provision in any prison space abroad that held prisoners from England and Wales.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-prison-rental-to-ensure-public-protection>

What is the impact of an ageing infrastructure and are Victorian prisons fit for purpose?

- 4.14 The state of the prison estate is a significant barrier to providing good quality education. This was noted by the Education Select Committee in the report of its recent prison education inquiry, which stated that “without significant investment in the prison estate, in buildings, classrooms, equipment and technology, prisoners will not be able to get the skills and qualification that they need to find employment to turn their lives around”.¹⁴
- 4.15 Classrooms and other education facilities are too often in an unacceptable state. This was reflected in evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee, with one submission by prison teachers describing “rotting walls and doors, mould, leaking roofs requiring buckets, [and a] lack of adequate heating”.¹⁵ Moreover the layout of some prisons - with, for example, education departments only accessible from one wing - is not conducive to making education available to everyone. This is particularly the case given the more restricted regimes that are generally in place post-Covid which, alongside staff shortages, make it more difficult for people to move around prisons.
- 4.16 A further issue is the lack of access to laptops or other digital devices and the internet within prison and the problems that this creates for education provision. While some progress has been made (with some in-cell provision, including offline laptops provided by Coracle Inside), there is still a long way to go to meet the Ministry of Justice’s aim, set out in the 2021 ‘Prisons Strategy White Paper’, for the prison system to be “digitally enabled for prisoners and staff, by default”.¹⁶
- 4.17 The lack of access to digital devices and the internet means that people in prison cannot develop the digital skills that are now essential for life outside prison. They also do not have access to the vast array of educational resources that are freely available in the community. It also presents challenges for the provision of distance learning. While PET continues to provide paper-based courses for people in prison, distance learning in the community is now largely provided online and similar access will be needed to ensure that people in prison can access the widest range of high-quality courses in the future.
- 4.18 Addressing the lack of access to digital devices and the internet is therefore essential to ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is routinely available to learners in the community. In-cell digital technology and safe and secure access to the internet should become standard, both as a learning tool and to enable people to gain the digital skills that they will need on release. While this may take time to implement across the whole prison estate, a clear strategy and timeline is needed as to how this will be achieved. This will help to ensure that consistent progress is made.
- 4.19 In the meantime, there needs to be much more access for people in prison to digital devices in education departments and libraries or on wings to enable them to study and to improve their digital skills. High-quality digital content,

¹⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

¹⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19555/html/>

¹⁶ p.18: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61af18e38fa8f5037e8ccc47/prisons-strategy-white-paper.pdf>

designed to meet the needs of people in prison, is also needed, to make the best use of the digital access that is available.

5) Conclusion

- 5.1 Education should be at the heart of rehabilitation in prisons - evidence shows that participating in education both reduces reoffending and increases employment among prison leavers. However, good quality education can only be delivered in prison if it is properly funded, there is sufficient capacity, the right resources are available, and teachers and learners have the right environment to work in. Access to digital learning opportunities is also key. Achieving this is not possible in the prison estate as it currently is, and will only become more difficult if the population and levels of overcrowding continue to increase. As the Ministry of Justice further develops its plans to manage the prison population and develop the prison estate, it is essential that the provision of education is central to their thinking.

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