

## Written evidence submitted by Prisoners' Education Trust (PEC0011)

### Summary of key points

- Access to good quality education for people in prison is key to running an effective prison system, given that robust and extensive evidence shows that participating in education while in prison reduces reoffending and increases the chance of securing employment on release.
- The provision of education in prison is currently negatively affected by limitations in the prison estate.
- It is therefore essential that in planning future prison estate capacity, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) considers not just cell capacity but also whether suitable and sufficient facilities are in place to enable people in prison to access education and training.
- These considerations should be part of plans to refurbish and expand existing prisons and of plans for building new prisons.
- This should include the capacity and condition of education departments, associated staffing issues, and access to digital devices and the internet.
- We hope that the Public Accounts Committee will consider these issues as part of their inquiry on prison estate capacity.

### 1) About Prisoners' Education Trust

- 1.1 PET is an independent charity that offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison across England and Wales. We offer 130 different courses – including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses – and enable 1,500 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures.
- 1.2 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 people in prison who PET does not support.
- 1.3 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.
- 2.2 It is therefore essential that planning for future prison estate capacity goes beyond simply the number of available cells and considers whether there is commensurate capacity in education departments, workshops and libraries. We hope that the Public Accounts Committee will take this into account in the conduct of this inquiry.

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### 3) The importance of education in prison

- 3.1 PET believes that the Public Accounts Committee should consider the delivery of education in prison as part of this inquiry because accessing education can make a real and substantial difference to people's lives.
- 3.2 Robust evidence from England and Wales and from other jurisdictions shows that participating in education while in prison reduces the likelihood of reoffending and increases the likelihood of prison leavers securing employment. This includes reports from the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education published in 2017<sup>1</sup> and 2018<sup>2</sup> and extensive evidence globally, including a rapid evidence assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in reducing reoffending and increasing employment by Manchester Metropolitan University<sup>3</sup> and a comprehensive meta-analysis of the available evidence by RAND.<sup>4</sup> The evidence in support of the efficacy of prison education is set out in more detail in a 2024 report published by Clinks, the national infrastructure body supporting the voluntary sector working in criminal justice, and available at: [www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence](http://www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence)
- 3.3 Education provision in prison is of particular importance because of the educational needs of people in prison. People in prison have substantially lower levels of literacy and numeracy than the general population. The results of the majority of initial assessments of people in prison - 73% of Maths assessments and 71% of English assessments in 2023–24 - are at Entry Level 3 or below. Entry Level 3 is roughly the literacy and numeracy level you would expect of somebody leaving primary school. More than one in five (21%) - nearly 9,500 people - were at Entry Level 1 for English in 2023-24, the literacy level normally expected of someone aged 5–7. By contrast, less than 0.1% were at Level 3 (equivalent to A-level).<sup>5</sup> The contrast in literacy rates with the broader population is particularly stark — only 14.9% of the adult population has literacy levels at or below Entry Level 3 (compared to 71% of people in prison). The equivalent figure for numeracy is 49.1% (compared to 73% of people in prison).<sup>6</sup>
- 3.4 Previous research has found that just 53% of people in prison reported having at least one qualification (including GCSEs or equivalent and higher qualifications, and trade apprenticeships) prior to entering prison. By comparison around 85% of the general population had at least one qualification. 42% of people in prison reported that they had been expelled or permanently excluded from school.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Justice and Department for Education (2017) *Exploring the outcomes of prisoner learners: Analysis of linked offender records from the Police National Computer and Individualised Learner Records*. Available at

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/633198/pnc-ilor.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/633198/pnc-ilor.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University and London Economics (2018) *Evaluation of prisoner learning: Initial impacts and delivery*. Available at

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initialimpacts-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initialimpacts-report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ellison, M., Szifris, K., Horan, R., and Fox, C. (2017) 'A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in reducing recidivism and increasing employment' in *Probation Journal*, 64(2), p.108–128. Available at <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/618360/>

<sup>4</sup> Davis, L., Bozick, R., Steele, J., Saunders, J. and Miles, J. (2013) *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. Available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024), *Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2023 to 2024*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2023-to-2024>

<sup>6</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2012), *The 2011 Skills for Life Survey: A Survey of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Levels in England*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/36000/12-p168-2011-skills-for-life-survey.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/36000/12-p168-2011-skills-for-life-survey.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Justice (2010), *Compendium of reoffending statistics and analysis*.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/199224/compendium-of-reoffending-statistics-and-analysis.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/199224/compendium-of-reoffending-statistics-and-analysis.pdf)

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### 4) Current provision of education in prison

- 4.1 At present, prison education primarily focuses on literacy, numeracy and vocational skills up to Level 2 (recognising significantly lower levels of literacy and numeracy among people in prison than for the general population). In public sector prisons in England this is delivered by specialist providers, through contracts with HMPPS). In addition, prison governors have some funding available to bring in additional provision via the Dynamic Purchasing System. This is used for a wide range of educational activities, including sport, art activities and peer reading schemes. Alongside this, people in prison can access distance learning courses, provided by PET, and higher education, primarily with the Open University. Employers also work in prisons to provide training and employment opportunities, and a range of charities also provide education, training and other related activity.
- 4.2 Despite the well-evidenced benefits of participating in education in prison, however, there are problems with both access to education in prison and the quality of what is provided. Many fewer people accessed education last year than peak levels a decade ago, while the Ofsted Annual Report for 2023–24 noted that “prison education remains weak, almost without exception”<sup>8</sup> and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Charlie Taylor has described prison education as “nowhere near good enough”.<sup>9</sup>
- 4.3 Given the impact that participating in education can have for people in prison, in order to make custodial sentences more effective the Ministry of Justice should prioritise improving prison education. PET has produced a briefing setting out the steps that should be taken to achieve this, available at: <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2024/09/new-briefing-sets-out-10-recommendations-to-transform-prison-education/>. A number of these recommendations relate specifically to the issues covered by this Public Accounts Committee inquiry and are summarised below.

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<sup>8</sup> Ofsted (2024) *Ofsted annual report 2023/24: education, children's services and skills*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202324-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, C. (2023) *Chief Inspector's blog: What's going wrong with education in prisons?* Available at <https://hmiprisoners.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/chief-inspectors-blog-whats-going-wrong-with-education-in-prisons/>

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### 5) Response to the inquiry

#### *Refurbishment of the current prison estate*

- 5.1 The current state of the prison estate is a significant barrier to providing good quality education, with classrooms and other education facilities too often in an unacceptable state. This was reflected in evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee for its 2022 inquiry on prison education, with one submission by prison teachers describing “rotting walls and doors, mould, leaking roofs requiring buckets, [and a] lack of adequate heating”<sup>10</sup> The inquiry’s report 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”.<sup>11</sup>
- 5.2 Since then, the presence of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in prisons has created additional challenges, with the main education block at HMP Northumberland having to be taken out of use.<sup>12</sup>
- 5.3 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-pandemic which, alongside staff shortages, make it more difficult for people to move around prisons. Access to libraries has also suffered.
- 5.4 To address this, HMPPS should commission an independent assessment of the physical condition of prison education departments and develop a prioritised plan for refurbishments and improvements. They should commit to addressing all of its recommendations within a decade.

#### *Expanding existing prisons and installing temporary accommodation*

- 5.5 One of the ways that HMPPS is increasing capacity is expanding existing prisons and installing temporary accommodation. While this, and particularly the use of Rapid Deployment Cells (RDCs), may be a relatively quick way to increase capacity, it is essential that there is a commensurate increase in the capacity of prison education departments, workshops and other education or training opportunities. Where that is not the case, a smaller proportion of people in the prison will be able to access education. It is therefore essential that where prisons are expanded, either through the use of RDCs or permanent new accommodation, additional resources are also provided to expand the availability of education.
- 5.6 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.<sup>13</sup> More use of temporary accommodation within existing prisons will only exacerbate this issue.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19555/html/>

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

<sup>12</sup> <https://insidetime.org/newsround/prisoners-evacuated-due-to-crumble-prone-concrete/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/116042/html/>

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### *Building new prisons*

- 5.7 Where new prisons are being built, HMPPS must take into account the delivery of education and training. This should include ensuring that:
- The education facilities have sufficient capacity to meet the needs of the intended population.
  - The education facilities are accessible to all the people in the prison, wherever they are held and whatever their accessibility needs.
  - Library provision is sufficient and accessible to all.
  - There is in-cell access to digital devices and the internet and sufficient provision of computers across the prison.

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- 5.8 Where prison design is not right, it can have an impact on education and training provision. For example, an evaluation of the first year of operation of HMP Five Wells, one of the most-recently built prisons, noted that staff said that ventilation in education areas was too noisy, while learners “complained of a lack of air movement, feeling claustrophobic and poor temperature regulation in the education areas”. It also noted that “the open plan library, designed to be in a central location and accessible, was too noisy which made it unusable”.<sup>14</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons’ first report on HMP Five Wells noted that it had “surprisingly been built with no dedicated gymnasium, which had created considerable challenges for staff. A workshop had been converted to serve this purpose”.<sup>15</sup> While this would have been a sensible operational decision, it would have had an impact on training capacity.
- 5.9 Opening a new prison is a major endeavour and it should be expected that there will be some challenges and teething issues. However, it is important that HMPPS learn from these in the design and build of further new prisons. To this end, the evaluation of HMP Five Wells’s first year referred to above was welcome.

### *Digital devices and access to the internet*

- 5.10 In building new prisons and refurbishing the current estate, HMPPS should also consider how they can enhance access to digital devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) and the internet. Access to digital devices and the internet in prison is important for education delivery. Without access to digital devices, 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 digital 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. Access to the internet is therefore essential in ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is routinely available in the community.
- 5.11 It is particularly important given that 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, providing 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 will be easier to achieve if people in prison can access educational opportunities remotely via the internet.
- 5.12 Improving access to digital devices and the internet is therefore key. But while some progress has been made, 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”.<sup>16</sup> The roll out of Launchpad (a platform which provides people with secure access to a content hub via a laptop in their cell and is due to be available in 19 prisons by March 2025), the availability of 2,500 laptops provided by Coracle Inside, and plans for a new digital

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<sup>14</sup> Voisey, J., Box, G., Soyel, L. and Wakeling, H. (2024) *HMP Five Wells One Year On: What have we learnt?* Available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67448e1081f809b32c856925/five-wells-report.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> [https://hmiprison.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmipris\\_reports/hmp-five-wells/](https://hmiprison.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-five-wells/)

<sup>16</sup> p.18: Ministry of Justice (2021) *Prisons Strategy White Paper*. Available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61af18e38fa8f5037e8ccc47/prisons-strategy-white-paper.pdf>

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- platform alongside the new education contracts are all welcome developments. But the majority of people in prison still lack access to a digital device and the internet.
- 5.13 In-cell digital technology and safe and secure access to the internet should become standard, ensuring that people can choose from the widest range of high-quality courses and resources. 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 to ensure that consistent progress is made. The Ministry of Justice and HMPPS should therefore publish a strategy setting out how they will make secure access to the internet available across the prison estate, with a focus on making in-cell access available where possible. This should include a clear timetable for implementation.

### *Managing overcrowding*

- 5.14 Current challenges in keeping pace with demand for prison places has led to severe prison overcrowding. Prison overcrowding creates significant problems for the delivery of prison education. Firstly, with prisons holding more people than they were designed for, education departments are unlikely to have the capacity needed. This was noted recently by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Charlie Taylor, who said that people in overcrowded prisons are “not able to get access to things like education, to training, to skills. We’ve got more prisoners, but we’re not building more education facilities, so they just haven’t got enough to do during the day.”<sup>17</sup> 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.
- 5.15 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.
- 5.16 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.
- 5.17 In developing future plans for the prison estate, HMPPS therefore needs to consider how overcrowding can be reduced and ultimately ended, rather than assuming that overcrowding will continue indefinitely.

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<sup>17</sup> Barnes, H. (2024) *The prison system is broken*. Available at <https://www.newstatesman.com/ns-interview/2024/07/the-prison-system-is-broken>

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### *Prison staffing*

- 5.18 Finally, increasing prison capacity will require more prison officers. Current shortages show the challenges in recruiting and retaining sufficient officers, and where there are shortages of prison officers it has an impact on education.
- 5.19 Where there are insufficient officers, people cannot always be escorted safely around the prison or moved from their wing to their allocated activity. Given that the delivery of the majority of prison education and training depends on access to classrooms and workshops, if learners cannot get to them then activities cannot go ahead. The latest annual prison performance ratings show that prisons are not making full use of the education capacity that they have available. Of the prisons that provided data, more than half (53%) had rates of attendance of less than 75%. Five prisons had attendance rates of less than 50%.<sup>18</sup>
- 5.20 Even when learners can get to classrooms, officer shortages may lead to them arriving late or needing to return to their wing early. This disrupts the planned lessons and puts more pressure on prison teachers. Staff shortages can also affect prison libraries, which can be closed with little or no notice because there are no staff to oversee access.
- 5.21 Insufficient staffing levels also mean that officers have less time to spend with people one-to-one. This has an impact on education. If they have the time to do so, prison officers can encourage people to engage with education, help them to recognise it as a way to use their time in prison productively and achieve their goals, and support them as learners. Insufficient staffing levels make this extremely difficult for officers to do.
- 5.22 Plans for future officer recruitment therefore need to take into account not only the minimum numbers required to keep a prison open, but the number required to run a full regime that gives people in prison the greatest chance of meaningful rehabilitation.
- 5.23 As well as more officers, a growing prison estate and prison population will require more prison teachers to deliver prison education. And as with prison officers, there are issues with recruiting and retaining enough prison teachers. Teachers in prison receive lower wages than in the community, and there are concerns about the limitations of prison teaching as a career. There are few opportunities for progression, insufficient investment in training and little job security. Taken together, these factors create a reluctance to join the prison education workforce.
- 5.24 Retention is also an issue, with research carried out in 2021 by the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) and University and College Union (UCU) - the union for prison teachers - finding that seven in ten teachers were considering leaving prison education in the next five years.<sup>19</sup> The risks of people leaving due to elevated levels of stress, poor pay and conditions is a cause for significant concern.

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<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024), *Prison Performance Ratings: 2023 to 2024*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-ratings-2023-to-2024>

<sup>19</sup> UCU and the PLA (2021) *Hidden Voices: The experience of teachers working in prisons*. Available at <https://pla.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/08/hidden-voices-report/>



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5.25 It is important that this is addressed in a co-ordinated way, which means that the Ministry of Justice should take a leadership role, working with the prison education providers. The Ministry of Justice should therefore develop a strategy in partnership with education providers to ensure that we recruit, retain and develop the prison teachers that we need to deliver high-quality education in prison.

### **6) Conclusion**

6.1 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 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.

6.2 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.

**January 2025**