

## **Written evidence submitted by Prisoners Education Trust (RAR0075)**

### **1) About Prisoners' Education Trust**

- 1.1 Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) provides distance learning courses and related 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.
- 1.2 Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to access distance learning in prison are more likely to get a job and less likely to reoffend within one year of release than otherwise similar people who PET does not support.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3 PET also uses policy, research 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, and our evidence focuses on the provision of education and how it could be improved.

### **3) Response to the inquiry's Call for Evidence**

#### ***Question 3: What impact does custody have on prisoner health and wellbeing, and how effective is provision for this in prison in promoting rehabilitation?***

- 3.1 Custody has a negative impact on prisoner health and wellbeing, and this has been exacerbated by the overcrowding, understaffing and regime changes implemented as a response to the pandemic but now embedded in the system. Between 2018<sup>2</sup> and 2023<sup>3</sup>, women in prison reporting mental health problems increased from 67% to 81%, and for men it increased from 43% to 59%. In the 12 months to June 2024, incidents of self-harm in prison increased by 19%.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.2 As well as its rehabilitative benefits, participating in education helps to boost the mental health and wellbeing of people in prison by helping them to occupy their time positively and learn new skills. People have reported improved self-esteem, self-confidence, self-discipline and communication skills.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> p.44: Prison Reform Trust (2020) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2019*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bromley-Briefings-Prison-Factfile-Winter-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> p.60: Prison Reform Trust (2024) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: February 2024*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winter-2024-factfile.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-june-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-september-2024-assaults-and-self-harm-to-june-2024>

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, C. (2014) *Brain Cells: Listening to Prisoner Learners, Third Edition*. Available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PET-Brain-Cells-3-Report-LR.pdf> and Prison Reform Trust (2003) *Time to Learn: Prisoners' views on prison education*. Available at

- 3.3 With people spending more time in their cells than ever before, distance learning courses can provide them with something to focus on and a positive way to spend their time. As one learner told us, “[my course has] given me confidence to know I have a future. It has helped me with my mental health and ultimately made me feel more human”.
- 3.4 People who participate in education are more able to engage with the broader prison regime. People may also want to take on additional roles and responsibilities within prison, with - for example - 47% of people who have completed a PET course telling us that they have subsequently volunteered in prison.

**Question 4: What is the current offer of training and education available in prisons and is it sufficient?**

- 4.1 Access to education in prison is important for rehabilitation. Robust evidence from England and Wales, including that published by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Department for Education, and from other jurisdictions shows that participating in education in prison reduces the likelihood of reoffending and increases the likelihood of prison leavers securing employment. This evidence is summarised in a 2024 report published by Clinks.<sup>6</sup>
- 4.2 Prison education in public sector prisons in England 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). This is delivered by specialist providers, through contracts with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). These contracts run until 2025 and the commissioning process for their replacements is underway at the time of writing, with the new contracts due to commence in the autumn.
- 4.3 In addition, prison governors have funding available to bring in additional provision via the Dynamic Purchasing System. This is used for a range of educational activities, including sport, art 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.
- 4.4 Arrangements in private prisons and prisons in Wales differ but the focus of the core provision is broadly similar.
- 4.5 Despite its importance, there are problems with access to education in prison and the quality of what is provided. In 2023-24, more than half of Ofsted inspections (54%) found education provision to be inadequate. The vast majority of the rest were judged to be “requires improvement” (33%). No prison has been judged outstanding for five years, as this summary of Ofsted inspection outcomes for 2015-16 to 2023-24 shows.

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<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/time-to-learn-prisoners-views-on-prison-education>

<sup>6</sup> [www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence](http://www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence)

	Total number of prisons/YOIs inspected	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate
2023-24	39	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	13 (33%)	21 (54%)
2022-23	43	0 (0%)	4 (9%)	20 (47%)	19 (44%)
2021-22	22	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	10 (45%)	11 (50%)
2019-20	32	0 (0%)	9 (28%)	19 (59%)	4 (13%)
2018-19	45	1 (2%)	17 (38%)	20 (44%)	7 (16%)
2017-18	41	0 (0%)	16 (39%)	20 (49%)	5 (12%)
2016-17	41	1 (2%)	22 (54%)	12 (29%)	6 (15%)
2015-16	42	2 (5%)	14 (33%)	20 (48%)	6 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>4 (1%)</b>	<b>88 (29%)</b>	<b>134 (44%)</b>	<b>79 (26%)</b>

Reflecting this, the Ofsted Annual Report for 2023-24 noted that “prison education remains weak, almost without exception”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Charlie Taylor has described prison education as “nowhere near good enough”.<sup>8</sup>

- 4.6 Not only is education in prison not of good enough quality, but not enough people can access it. In 2023-24, 49,965 people participated in a course in prison, including 21,781 people who participated in functional skills courses (primarily English and Maths, but also ICT and ESOL). A change in methodology means that these figures are not directly comparable to previous years, but it is clear that the number of people participating in education is nowhere near the peak levels of a decade ago (101,600 people took part in a course in 2014-15, including 39,300 people who took part in functional skills courses). While the coronavirus pandemic had an impact, the longer-term picture is of declining participation even before the pandemic.
- 4.7 The latest annual prison performance ratings show that prisons are also not making full use of the 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>9</sup>
- 4.8 Moreover not enough of those who do access education in prison make sufficient progress, with only a minority achieving Level 2 in English and Maths. Of the 21,781 people who participated in a functional skills course in 2023-24, only 1,976 achieved Level 2 in English and only 1,334 achieved Level 2 in Maths. Prisons too often also fail to achieve the basics, such as teaching people to read.<sup>10</sup>
- 4.9 There are also specific concerns about education provision in women’s prisons. In general, it is largely similar to that in men’s prisons, although the vocational

<sup>7</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>8</sup> Taylor, C. (2023) *Chief Inspector’s blog: What’s going wrong with education in prisons?* Available at <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/chief-inspectors-blog-whats-going-wrong-witheducation-in-prisons/>

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024) *Prison Performance Ratings: 2023 to 2024*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-ratings-2023-to-2024>

<sup>10</sup> Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) *Prison education: A review of reading education in prisons*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-readingeducation-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons>

training on offer tends to be more gender specific. While a recognition that women in prison may have specific needs and interests is welcome, Ofsted has criticised the vocational training available as insufficient to meet women’s aspirations. At HMP Peterborough, for example, inspectors reported that “vocational training did not enable women to progress from basic levels to an acceptable standard for employment.”<sup>11</sup>

- 4.10 While this echoes the problems facing men’s prisons, there may be particular challenges in women’s prisons in getting the balance right between providing opportunities that meet women’s aspirations and avoiding stereotyping and limiting the options available. Support should be provided to women’s prisons to help them to get this balance right. This should include considering the needs of young adult women. We recently published research highlighting the importance of education to this group and how it could better meet their needs.<sup>12</sup>
- 4.11 The reasons why prison education is not good enough are complex and include both broader pressures on the prison system and issues related specifically to education delivery. Given the impact that participating in education can have, the MoJ should prioritise improving prison education in order to make custodial sentences more effective. PET has produced a briefing setting out the necessary steps to achieve this.<sup>13</sup>

*a) How does this differ for those on the youth custody estate?*

- 4.12 Children in the youth estate are of school age and should have access to education comparable to what is available in the community. However the current picture is bleak. The recent thematic review of education provision in YOIs by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted describes how “the quality of education provided to children in custody has worsened. Too often, even the very basic aspects of educational provision, such as enough hours of classes being available, or children being escorted to lessons on time, are not in place.”<sup>14</sup> HMIP’s annual survey of children and young people revealed that some are spending more than 22 hours a day locked in their cells, with fewer attending education this year than last. None of the five YOIs were judged to be providing an adequate education.<sup>15</sup>
- 4.13 In our submission to the Commission on Young Lives<sup>16</sup> we called for a national strategy for the children’s custodial estate that facilitates safe and supportive environments. Our recommendations included: trauma-informed teaching; embedding education outside traditional classroom settings; and ensuring the provision of opportunities for educational progress that are tailored to each learner.

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<sup>11</sup> p.42: <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Peterborough-women-web-2023.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Prisoners-Education-Trust-Young-Womens-Education-in-Prison-report.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2024/09/new-briefing-sets-out-10-recommendations-to-transform-prison-education/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children#foreword-by-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

<sup>15</sup> [https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmipris\\_reports/children-in-custody-2023-24/](https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/children-in-custody-2023-24/)

**Question 5: To what extent are prisoners given enough time out of cell to engage in purposeful activity?**

5.1 Evidence from HMIP shows that people in prison are spending too much time in their cells. This has an inevitable impact on the delivery of core educational activities, which are largely delivered in classrooms and workshops. While we recognise the pressure that prisons are under, there should be a focus on more time out of cells and maximising access to education.

*a) What impact does contracting and staffing have on the delivery of purposeful activities in prisons?*

5.2 Current shortages of prison officers have a significant impact on education delivery. Where there are insufficient officers, people cannot always be escorted safely around the prison. Given that the delivery of most education and training depends on access to classrooms and workshops, if learners cannot get to them then activities cannot go ahead. Officer shortages may also lead to learners arriving late or being returned to their wing early. This disrupts the planned lessons, increasing pressure on prison teachers. Staff shortages also affect prison libraries, which can be closed because there are no staff to oversee access.

5.3 As well as officer numbers, education delivery is impacted by the availability of prison teachers. A growing prison estate and prison population requires more prison teachers, but there are issues with recruitment. Wages are lower than in the community and there are limited opportunities for progression, insufficient investment in training and little job security. Taken together, these factors create a reluctance to join the prison education workforce.

5.4 Retention is also an issue, with research carried out in 2021 by the Prisoner Learning Alliance and University and College Union - the union for prison teachers - finding that seven in ten teachers were considering leaving prison education in the next five years.<sup>17</sup> The risks of people leaving due to elevated levels of stress and poor pay and conditions is a cause for significant concern.

5.5 It is important that this is addressed in a coordinated way. The MoJ should take a leadership role, working with the prison education providers to ensure that we recruit, retain and develop the teachers that we need to deliver high-quality education in prison.

**Question 6: How do current prison population constraints affect the availability and quality of rehabilitation programmes?**

6.1 The increasing prison population and prison overcrowding create significant problems for prison education provision. With prisons holding more people than they were designed for, education departments are unlikely to have the capacity needed. This is exacerbated when Rapid Deployment Cells are used to increase a prison's capacity, without a commensurate increase in the capacity of prison education departments or other education or training opportunities. This was noted by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, who said that people in overcrowded prisons are "not able to get access to things like education, to training, to skills. We've got

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<sup>16</sup> <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2022/03/stopping-the-neglect-of-children-caught-up-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>

<sup>17</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/>

more prisoners, but we're not building more education facilities, so they just haven't got enough to do during the day."<sup>18</sup>

- 6.2 Furthermore, the need to manage population pressures increases the risk that people will be moved around the estate, often at short notice. These decisions do not usually take into account their educational needs. 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 and make it less likely that learners will want to participate in education in the future.
- 6.3 The number of people in prison on remand has increased significantly in recent years. While it is hoped that this will reduce over time, in the meantime thought needs to be given as to how to enable people on remand to access education (as discussed in the Justice Committee's 2023 report on adult custodial remand<sup>19</sup>). This should include making shorter courses available, but some people now spend years on remand, before sometimes being released upon sentencing due to time served, and would often benefit from access to mainstream prison education provision.

**Question 7: To what extent do prison buildings and their maintenance facilitate or hinder rehabilitation?**

- 7.1 The state of the prison estate is a significant barrier to providing good quality education.
- 7.2 Firstly, classrooms and other education facilities are too often in an unacceptable condition. 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>20</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>21</sup>
- 7.3 Secondly, 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.
- 7.4 Thirdly, the lack of access to digital devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) and the internet in most prisons is a barrier to effective education provision. Without access to digital devices, people in prison cannot develop the digital skills that are now essential for life outside prison and do not have access to the vast array of digital educational resources that are 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

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<sup>18</sup> Barnes, H. (2024) *The prison system is broken*. Available at <https://www.newstatesman.com/ns-interview/2024/07/the-prison-system-is-broken>

<sup>19</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33530/documents/182421/default/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19555/html/>

<sup>21</sup> Education Select Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

now largely provided online. Access to the internet is therefore essential in ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is available in the community.

- 7.5 This is particularly important given that average sentence lengths have increased in recent years, with more people in prison serving long sentences. Education provision in prison needs to provide more opportunities for people serving long sentences to progress in their education (building on the opportunities provided by PET through distance learning). This will be easier to achieve if people in prison can access courses digitally.
- 7.6 Improving access to digital devices and the internet is therefore key. While some progress has been made (including the ongoing rollout of the in-cell Launchpad platform), there is still a long way to go to meet the MoJ'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>22</sup>. The majority of people in prison still lack access to a digital device and the internet.
- 7.7 In-cell digital technology and secure access to the internet should become standard, ensuring that people can choose from the widest range of courses and resources. The MoJ should 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.

**Question 8: What examples of best practice within the prison service are there in promoting rehabilitation?**

- 8.1 Education provision has been judged as 'good' by Ofsted at only a small number of prisons in recent years and lessons from these prisons should be shared with other establishments to enable good practice to be replicated.
- 8.2 The lessons that can be drawn from the very positive inspection report of HMP Oakwood<sup>23</sup> should also be considered. The importance of prisoner-led initiatives and the role that people in Oakwood play in delivering purposeful activity is worthy of note and can be applied to educational settings, with learners involved in curriculum design and supporting delivery as peer teachers and mentors.
- 8.3 It is also worth considering the findings of the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab (JDL), which assesses the impact of organisations or programmes in the criminal justice system. The organisations that deliver education in prison and have tested their impact via the JDL are PET, the Open University and City & Guilds,<sup>24</sup> with all of them showing a positive impact, and there are a range of other projects that have been evaluated.

**9) Conclusion**

- 9.1 Education should be at the heart of rehabilitation in prisons - participating in education both reduces reoffending and increases employment among prison

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<sup>22</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>

<sup>23</sup> <https://hmiprisoninspectorates.gov.uk/news/what-makes-oakwood-so-good/>

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024) *Summary spreadsheet of JDL publications*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/672208bd3aa14203d06ef49f/Spreadsheet\\_summary\\_of\\_JDL\\_publications.ods](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/672208bd3aa14203d06ef49f/Spreadsheet_summary_of_JDL_publications.ods)

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.

- 9.2 At the moment, the provision of education is nowhere near good enough. In working to make prisons more effective in reducing reoffending, improving access to prison education and the quality of what is provided should therefore be a priority for HMPPS and the MoJ.

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