

Justice Committee

Oral evidence: [Rehabilitation and Resettlement: Ending the Cycle of Reoffending](#), HC 469

Tuesday 11 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Justice Committee members present: Andy Slaughter (Chair); Josh Babarinde; Pam Cox; Linsey Farnsworth; Tessa Munt.

Education Committee members present: Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Mark Sowards.

Questions 87 - 174

Witnesses

[I](#): Annick Platt, National Operations Director, Novus; Jon Collins, Chief Executive, Prisoners' Education Trust; Michala Robertson, Assistant Director for Student Additional Support, Open University.

[II](#): Lee Owston, National Director for Education, Ofsted; Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union; Victoria Barnett, Chair of the Prison Libraries Group, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Jon Collins \(RAR0075\)](#)

[Victoria Barnett \(RAR0009\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Annick Platt, Jon Collins and Michala Robertson.

Q87 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Justice Committee, which is looking at prison education as part of our inquiry into rehabilitation and resettlement. Before I ask our first guests to introduce themselves, we will—as usual—do our declarations of interest, starting with Tessa Munt.

Tessa Munt: I am the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills in Somerset, and all my declarations are on the website.

Josh Babarinde: I am the MP for Eastbourne. I used to run a company that trained and employed ex-offenders and delivered some education services to them. All my other interests are declared on the register.

Chair: I am the Chair of the Committee. I am a non-practising barrister. I am the patron of two justice-related charities, the Upper Room, which is concerned with reoffending, and the Hammersmith and Fulham Law Centre, and I am a member of the Unite and GMB trade unions.

Pam Cox: I am the Member of Parliament for Colchester. I was previously a professor in criminology and sociology at the University of Essex, and my interests are declared on the register.

Linsey Farnsworth: I am the Member of Parliament for Amber Valley. I am a non-practising solicitor, formerly working at the Crown Prosecution Service, and my registration of interests is as on the website.

Mark Swards: I am the MP for Leeds South West and Morley. I am a former maths teacher, and all my interests are declared on the website.

Mrs Brackenridge: I am the MP for Wolverhampton North East, guesting on today's Justice Committee because Mark and I are on the Education Committee. I am a former deputy headteacher working in secondary schools, and all my interests are declared in the register.

Chair: Thank you, Sureena, for pointing out that we have two guests from the Education Committee as well today, which we are very pleased with. Now you know who we are, perhaps you would introduce yourselves.

Annick Platt: I am the operations director for Novus. Novus is part of the LTE Group, which is a further education corporation. We deliver prison education in just over 50 prisons and have been delivering for over 30 years.

Jon Collins: I am chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust. We are a charity that provides access to distance learning for people in prison.



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Michala Robertson: I am assistant director for student additional support at the Open University, and we provide higher education in over 150 prisons in the UK.

Q88 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming to share your expertise with us today. Different members of the Committee will ask you questions. They may be directed to individuals but otherwise feel free to answer any of them. I am just going to kick off with a couple of questions. In your view, what role does supporting prisoners' educational outcomes have in promoting efforts towards rehabilitation?

Jon Collins: There is a pretty robust and extensive evidence base now that shows that participating in education while in prison both reduces reoffending rates on release and increases the likelihood that someone will move into employment when they leave. We obviously know that employment is important in terms of helping people not to reoffend. Evidence from England and Wales, from abroad, and I am sure from all our own work, demonstrates that clear link. We know that it has an important impact on rehabilitation, and we know that by giving people the skills and qualifications they need, it helps them to thrive when released. We also know that it can help with self-confidence, with engaging with the prison regime, and with their wellbeing, all of which can help to contribute to their rehabilitation.

Annick Platt: With 62% of the population having a literacy and numeracy need, there is an awful lot to do. The scale of need is great. With the expense of sending someone to custody, it is really important that we ensure that we spend that time wisely. I have spent 30 years teaching and delivering prison education, and I have seen at first hand the power it can have to turn people's lives around. Spending that time wisely in prison is the right thing to do. If you do nothing, nothing will change. Today is just about recognising the importance of it and the research to show the power of prison education and what it can achieve for rehabilitation.

Michala Robertson: If I may, I would like to focus on higher education within prisons. Higher education is a really powerful tool for change. It is a tool to empower people into employment, and it reduces reoffending. Statistics from the Ministry of Justice Data Lab show that within 12 months of release, students who have been studying with the Open University are 28% more likely to be in employment, and there is a 40% reduction in reoffending within the first 12 months of release for students at the OU. The Longford Trust, which supports students on undergraduate degrees, shows that fewer than 5% of the recipients of its trust reoffend.

Q89 **Chair:** What percentage of prisoners undertake higher education?

Michala Robertson: We offer it in every one of the 150 prisons in England and Wales.



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Q90 **Chair:** Of just under 90,000 prisoners, how many of those will be undertaking higher education?

Michala Robertson: We have 2,000 students every academic year who are studying in prison.

Q91 **Chair:** Do you think that is a good level or do you think there is potential there?

Michala Robertson: There is potential to increase that. There are many barriers to learning and funding for higher education within prisons, and if those barriers were removed we would see greater numbers.

Q92 **Chair:** I have one other general question. We are obviously going to focus a lot on what the education offer is, but two things struck us. One is that there are so many barriers—sometimes physical ones—to prisoners actually reaching education because they are locked in their cell, because it is not available for one reason or another, or because there are staffing problems elsewhere in the prison. There has also been a series of attempts to modify the offer of that over time. Frankly, it is very difficult to be clear. You might be clear, but for an outsider it is not clear what is happening.

Can you just give us a picture of how difficult it is to educate prisoners at the moment? Are they a cohort of people who are welcoming education, with whom you are pushing at an open door—open door is probably the wrong phrase—or do you additionally have problems that there is simply not the funding, staffing or the facilities to do it?

Michala Robertson: The interest and the drive to succeed in higher education is definitely there. Our OU students are a testament to hard work, perseverance, and a deep personal commitment to growth. There are barriers for somebody who wants to apply to the OU. In order to be eligible to apply for a higher education degree with the OU, prisoners need to have completed their level 1 and level 2 literacy and numeracy. I have students who have shared that because of inaccurate record-keeping, they have repeatedly had to do level 1 and level 2, in one case 18 times. Because there was no proof that they had completed level 1 and level 2 literacy and numeracy, they were not able to apply for the OU.

There is also the six-year rule for funding: prisoners cannot apply for a student loan until six years or fewer from release. Higher education-level learning is not given the focus that it needs, and that core education is given within prison. We deliver it via distance and online learning methods, and so there are always technological barriers within prison. Finally, higher-level education is not part of purposeful activity, whether in a cell or in a classroom. There are pockets of really good practice where there are even Open University and distance learning wings, classroom facilities and ICT suites made available to OU learners, but it is not consistent, it is certainly not constant, and it is not given the priority that higher-level education should.



Annick Platt: On the other end of the scale, for learners who require that lower-level provision, who may be non-readers or scoring a level 2 or below—which, as I said, is around 62%—there are equal challenges there to accessing education. We have to remember over 40% of them have been excluded from the school environment prior to coming into custody. They are often adult learners, so the thought of engaging in a maths or English class in a classroom environment is probably the very last thing they want to do in a prison. We also have those complexities and challenges, and it is about how we hook and engage people into that learning offer. We are very confident that when we get them, we keep them—our retention rate is over 90%—but we have to get them first.

On top of all the complexities you talk about with officer shortages, the issue with movement—just physically getting people from A to B—can be a challenge and can be complex. Sometimes the environment that they come to is also difficult. You talked about whether funding is an issue. The built environment of prisons and some educational learning areas have not been invested in for the 30 years that I have been working there. We also need an environment and a built environment that is fit for a curriculum of the 21st century.

The level of funding for prison education is 17% lower than that of the community, but the need is four times higher for prison education than in the community. There is just a misalignment there that probably needs levelling up at some point. When you talk about the number of people in prison and those high levels of need, there is a real challenge there with funding as well as all the other complexities.

Q93 Tessa Munt: I might be trampling over something that I know Andy wanted to ask, but you said 62% of prisoners have literacy and numeracy needs. When and how does that get measured?

Annick Platt: When a prisoner comes into custody, they go through a resettlement and an induction process. Part of the induction process is an education and learning skills assessment completed by the education provider. It is alongside other prison inductions: they might be doing inductions for drugs, substance, housing and other things. We usually come in during those first five days in custody. If people are suffering some kind of substance misuse, it is not always ideal timing, but we come in during that time and we do a national screening test that looks at literacy, numeracy, and reading, and we provide levels.

That is all then recorded on the national prison system, hopefully to stop repeat testing because prisoners move from A to B, and then suddenly we throw another test at them. Again, that is not the best thing to do when we are trying to hook them into learning. It is all recorded, it is all there, and it is all measured. After that score we then develop a learning development plan with them that is personalised to them, their sentence length, how long they are going to be with us, what their needs are, and their rehabilitation requirements. It is a personal plan that they then follow.



Q94 Tessa Munt: Are there courses that they then cannot take? That might be a question for Michala. I understand there are courses that prisoners may not study. What are those?

Michala Robertson: You would not be able to study anything of level 3 and above, so A-level and above—none of the courses that Prisoners' Education Trust and the Open University offer and none of our Access courses.

The Open University is exactly that: open. We have an open entry policy, which means you do not need prior qualifications to study towards a degree. We will encourage you to enrol in one of our Access courses. It is interesting that the Government themselves are moving away from the mandatory level 1 and level 2 qualifications in areas such as apprenticeships. This is what we have been doing at the Open University for many years. But with our students in prison, they have that as a sanction—that they are not allowed to apply for anything above level 2 if they do not have recorded level 1 and level 2 literacy and numeracy.

Jon Collins: At the Prisoners' Education Trust we offer access to a range of distance learning courses including, as Michala mentioned, GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access courses, and a whole range of vocational courses: bookkeeping, business start-up, and so on. We offer about 130 courses altogether, so a really broad range, with the idea there is something there for everyone, but people are required to have done level 2 in literacy before they are able to access one of those courses. We know that relatively few people—about 7% last year—arrive in prison with level 2 already, and relatively small numbers progress to level 2 each year through the core education provision.

There is a pipeline issue, where there is a range of broader qualifications that essentially are not available to people until they have either demonstrated they are already at level 2, or they achieve level 2. You asked before about people who are interested in studying and whether people want to do education: we already have more people applying to us than we are able to support because of funding restrictions. None the less, we feel there are a lot more people out there who would be interested in what we have to offer, but they have to move through to level 2 in the core education system first before they can apply to us.

Q95 Tessa Munt: I might have not been very clear. Can a prisoner study law and eventually become a solicitor or a barrister?

Jon Collins: Annick would be better placed to speak to this than me, but the core education offer would obviously not include law; it focuses on literacy and numeracy, vocational courses, and a number of other things. If they achieved level 2 in literacy, they could come to us and study a GCSE, an A-level, or an OU Access course, and then go through and study with the OU. That could include law and a whole range of the OU's broad offer of degrees. We offer A-levels in as many subjects as we can. There are those opportunities to study a broad range of courses, and we



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try to remove as many restrictions as possible. There may be some restrictions around particular offence types and particular courses people do, but generally speaking we try to make it as open as possible.

Q96 Tessa Munt: I do not want to get bogged down in this, but I am pretty clear, having dealt with one particular prisoner, that he was absolutely forbidden from studying law, even though he had five A-levels way before he got to prison. I would ask you to write to the Chair of the Committee to just explain what one may not study, if you are at His Majesty's pleasure.

Jon Collins: That is really a question for the Prison Service because it makes those decisions, but I am happy to set out the guidance as we understand it. It might be something to refer to HMPPS.

Q97 Tessa Munt: You talked about a personal plan. Does the prisoner carry that or is that held by the prison? I am aware that sometimes when prisoners are moved, which is sometimes very frequently, it takes months for their plans to pick up with them. They sometimes have moved again; by the time the plan gets to prison B, they are already in prison C, and their education is completely disrupted. You were talking about everything being online and how everybody gets it all digitalised, but it is clear there is no talking from one prison to another, or even prison to centre to prison. Am I right?

Annick Platt: You are right, but it is becoming more digitalised. There is something called a digital ILP now that is being developed. That will be an online learning plan that will be developed once, then passed along throughout their sentence and accessible to different providers depending on where the prisoner goes. Yes, you are right, that is what we have experienced in the past: prisoners have been retested or had to start the journey again, which is just not conducive to their learning experience. But we are moving towards a digitalised service that is part of the Prison Service system. It is not a provider system; it is a Prison Service-wide system.

Q98 Mark Swards: Tessa has already teased out quite a lot of the information that I was going to ask about, but I wanted to ask you about the level of need across prisons. Of course, Annick, you have already set out what the percentages are for the prisons that you work with. My question would be then to Jon and Michala: does that match up with what you think the level of need is across prisons? Then to Annick, and to all three of you, what about neurodivergent needs? Are those a particular problem in prisons? What are the percentages there?

Jon Collins: The assessments that Annick mentioned are then collated and published as statistics by the Ministry of Justice, so we know quite a lot about the levels of people entering prison. Obviously, there is less information about people who are already in prison, so you do not necessarily have a picture of the prison population as a whole, but you know the levels that people are at when they enter.



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Annick has already talked about the proportion of people who are at entry level 2 or below, but it is worth bearing in mind that within that, there is quite a substantial number of people—about one in five of the people who arrive in prison every year—who for literacy are at entry level 1 or below. As a former teacher, you will probably know that is roughly what you expect in a child at age five to six. It is slightly different in adult literacy levels, but these are very low levels of literacy. In those circumstances, it is obviously going to be difficult for them to engage with the prison regime and to participate fully in any educational activities in the classroom.

It is really important to recognise that while there is a very high level of need across most of the prison population, and a very small proportion who are at level 2—roughly GCSE level—even within that, there is a cohort who have very low levels of literacy. That is why Ofsted and the prisons inspectorate have been right to really focus on reading among those with those low levels of literacy, to try to get them up to a level where they can engage with the regime more broadly.

Obviously, the cohort that we are working with directly as an organisation are those who—as I mentioned—are at level 2 or higher, and they are a minority in the prison population. We fund about 1,500 to 1,600 courses per year, and there are more than enough people applying to us, as I said. We have more demand than we can meet as a charity at this moment in time. They are a minority in the prison population, but they are a cohort who are keen to learn, keen to engage in the courses that we offer, and keen to do the best they can to turn their lives around and have more opportunities when they leave prison. It is really important to see that bigger group of people with high levels of need, but it is important not to lose sight of those people who are at higher levels, who want to continue to progress, and to try to make sure that we give them the opportunities to do that, both when they are in prison and when they leave.

Michala Robertson: I can speak to the neurodiverse needs. There are statistics to show that about 80% of prisoners have SpLD or neurodiverse needs. The OU has a very tailored, bespoke, individualised offer of learning, so accessibility is at the heart of all our materials. In addition, we provide reasonable adjustments and alternative formats for OU students studying with us, such as coloured overlays, large print, braille, and digital audio. We are working with a company called Coracle Inside, and one of the things we are working on is providing every OU student with a secure laptop and mobile device, which are gifted to them for the duration of their study. Within that, we can then use assistive software and technology to assist with neurodiverse needs.

Annick Platt: We see very high levels in custody, as you would expect. Again, managing that from a learning perspective is very difficult within the classroom. Over half of your classroom learners will have some kind of neurodiversity need that you will have to support within that learning



cohort, which is a challenge in itself. We also find that we have the new neurodiversity leads in prison, in custody, who are being introduced to work prison-wide to ensure that those with a need can engage in learning because sometimes they are the hardest to reach or they do not want to engage in learning. Like Michala says, we have a range of digital and teaching technologies that we will use to support need where possible.

Q99 Chair: Does the service you offer adapt according to the cohort you are dealing with—for example, female prisoners? Do you work with remand prisoners? I know they are not obliged to, but if they want to. What about IPP prisoners? How much do you tailor the service you operate to who you are dealing with?

Annick Platt: We tailor it all. As I said before about that individual learning plan, it is really individualised to their specific needs. We work across the board with all cohorts of learners, whether it is POCSSO, IPP, female, remand, sentence, lifers or young offenders. We have to tailor the curriculum offer to meet that particular need.

The women's estate is particularly difficult, with very complex, high-level needs. We talk about neurodiversity, but we are adding on some really extreme complexities with self-harm, domestic abuse, and sexual abuse, on top of any kind of LDD need. We have a more trauma-informed approach to our delivery in those sectors because those women are often the furthest away from learning, so we will adapt our learning style. Where possible and in the right environment, we will adapt our learning style to meet different cohorts.

Jon Collins: We offer a broad range of courses. What we try to do is if there is interest in doing a particular course, and we are able to provide a course that can be completed in prison—most of our courses are completed on paper because of limited digital access—we will make that course available. We try to tailor it to the individual needs. We have different levels, so people can progress through several levels in a similar topic or related areas. We try to individualise it to what people might want to apply to, and we are available across all prisons in England and Wales.

Q100 Chair: Does that include remand prisoners?

Jon Collins: At the moment, remand prisoners are not able to apply for our courses. We are available only to sentenced prisoners, but any sentence length and any type of sentence. You asked about female offenders, and we actually get a higher proportion of people in women's prisons applying to us than you would expect based on their proportion of the population. We see more female learners in our cohort than you would expect based on the make-up of the prison population.

Michala Robertson: We find, similar to Jon, that remand prisoners are not even encouraged into education, whatever form it is.

Q101 Chair: Can they if they wish to? The reason I ask is that we know that



one in five prisoners is a remand prisoner. They are there for longer periods of time, and that may be the entire time of their incarceration if they are released on sentence or not convicted. Do you not feel that you are missing a whole cohort?

Michala Robertson: Absolutely we do. Yes, 20% of prisoners are on remand at the moment, and that is a 20% we would be very interested to support. Because our learning is online and distance, it is flexible, so it can continue if they are released and found not guilty, and likewise it can continue if the other alternative occurs. With the female estate, I think 4% of the prison population is female, and 5.8% of OU students in prison are female, so we seem to be matching the prison picture. We have fewer numbers of under-21s—only 2.5% of our OU students are under 21—and we have no students who are under 20. That is an area we would really like to work with more.

Q102 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Listening to some experiences that you have shared, what would you share as the key barriers to provision and take-up of education across the prison estate? Can we start with Annick, please?

Annick Platt: I talked about some barriers before, about the whole attendance issue. Across our 43 adult estates, we have an attendance rate of about 69%. If we have a class of 10 learners, on average we have seven learners turning up to each session. Critically, that means there are three learners missing out on learning every session, every day, in every prison. When we talk about funding being restricted, it is such a shame that we do not have those places filled. The barriers are very much about the attendance and ensuring that those prisoners come.

There are also barriers, as I talked about, in the learning environment and the curriculum offer. We need to make sure the curriculum is fit for purpose, engaging, and is the right type of curriculum offer. The labour market needs are changing and evolving. We need to ensure our curriculum offer is ready for the next set of labour market needs and requirements. There are also some practical barriers for prisoners, such as getting paid to go to work in a prison; unfortunately, education is one of the lowest-paid activities but probably one of the activities that is known and proven to make such an impact on reducing reoffending. Those are some practical barriers that we face there as well.

Q103 **Mrs Brackenridge:** What about prison capacity?

Annick Platt: Yes, obviously with the overcrowding and prison capacity at the moment, there are high numbers and high levels of need for us when prioritising who gets education. There is not enough funding to support even those who have the very basic level of need. There is not enough provision to support just those learners. There are complexities when we have that scale of need, and suddenly we have to think about who we are prioritising here for education because there is only a certain amount of provision. That is a big need.



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We have also found that because of overcrowding, there was the early release scheme that we saw towards the end of last year, where suddenly large cohorts of offenders were released early. Some learners were midway through a course and at short notice were literally told, "Quick, you're off." We got as much notice as we could, and we tried to have partnerships through the gate and with community provision to ensure that they could continue learning, but those are challenges at the moment. There is a lot of high churn because prisoners are moving around the system at a much higher rate.

Jon Collins: I would agree with everything that Annick said. To add to it, a major barrier for us and for other learning providers is the lack of access to digital devices, so laptops or iPads and the internet, for most people in prison. We offer access to distance learning. Almost all distance learning in the community is now done online, but almost all our offer in prison is still done on paper because people do not have reliable and consistent access to a computer and to the internet. There are obviously secure ways of enabling people to access the internet in a way that ensures security but gives them learning opportunities, but for most people that is not routinely available. That is a major barrier in terms of both the breadth of what we can provide and the increased cost of having to provide it on paper, and it potentially makes the learning experience less positive. Lack of access to digital devices and the internet is a real challenge.

As Annick said, there is also a lack of access to education departments routinely where prisons are overcrowded and there are staffing shortages, and there is a lack of access to good quality education facilities. Something our learners say increasingly is that they are not able to get routine access to libraries either, which should happen routinely but does not always. There are a number of broader issues, and our experience has been that the more a prison is struggling as a prison, in terms of overcrowding and struggling to provide a good quality regime, the more difficult it will be for people to access education, and the more difficult it will be for them to have a positive learning experience.

One thing that we will be looking out for over the next couple of years is that we know that as the population starts to go up again, they are looking to add more temporary cells and more accommodation to existing prisons. It will be really important to ensure that the capacity of education departments, workshops, and other opportunities for people to learn grows alongside that. That way, you do not have more people in prison but fewer opportunities for them to access the things that we know will actually help them not to reoffend when they are released.

Michala Robertson: I agree with Jon and Annick, but for me, for higher education, the biggest barrier is that we are not considered purposeful activity within prisons. The average OU learner spends 10 hours a week studying. Whether that is done in a cell, in a library, or in a classroom environment, that is a really valuable use of time. For governors in



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prisons, that helps form their KPIs for purposeful activity. That is the biggest barrier, and that is the thing that would release more change for higher education in prisons.

Q104 Mrs Brackenridge: In terms of needs, I know from my former experience about the rising demands and the complexities that young people in particular are experiencing. You spoke about the identification of needs and an assessment that is done quite early on in the journey. How confident are you that prisoners' needs are actually identified and supported? I attended an event this morning that Jamie Oliver was in; it was a great platform raising awareness of a huge proportion of young people facing challenges with dyslexia. They represent something like 10% to 15% of a class, but they represent 50% of the prison population. What support is available for young people who are unidentified or misdiagnosed?

Annick Platt: Yes, there is support, but it is about how and when that support can be accessed. We talked before about the remand population, as of course some young offenders will be on remand as well, and the high churn. Sometimes the length of time in custody or in that one particular prison is so short that we do not have time to do something longer term or even diagnose correctly. We can do the quick intervention to get a literacy and numeracy assessment or a reading assessment quite quickly, but to do something more in depth about an LDD need requires a longer period of time. Sometimes we have done the diagnosis, but we do not then have time to deliver the intervention.

There is support available for young people. In the young people's estate, we have higher levels of SENCO workers and support and progression coaches who work a bit like a TA in a school; they work alongside our teachers to ensure that we can support them with some additional learning needs. But it is very complex given how long we have them, whether they are going to be moved around the prison or even just moved around the prison estate, and how successful we can be with that intervention. It is challenging.

Jon Collins: I just want to add on the children's estate specifically. Recent reports by both the Children's Commissioner, Ofsted and the prisons inspectorate have expressed quite serious concern about access to and quality of education in the children's estate, in YOIs particularly. Clearly it is a very challenging cohort that is being worked with, and they do need a lot of support. Both in the children's estate and in the adult estate, we are improving the screening, the gathering of information and the recording of that information, as has already been mentioned. That is really important and that is a good thing.

I know this better from the adult estate, but sometimes doing an assessment very early after people have arrived in prison—although it is important to find out quickly what is going on and where they are going—means you may not be getting a full picture. People are very discombobulated, obviously, having just arrived in custody, and may not



be giving you a full picture of their levels and needs. While it is important to do those assessments, what you want is a relationship over time between staff and learner, so that people get to genuinely understand their need and are able to personalise what is offered to them. The reality is that is very difficult to do in a prison system where there is overcrowding, -resourcing, and high levels of churn.

It is difficult to say that the specific needs of all the learners in prison are being met. You do not see that from Ofsted reports, and you do not see that from other assessments that are done. It is not a failure by individuals; it is a much broader system problem in terms of the pressure the prison system is under. There are also the difficulties of providing a really personalised, learner-focused offer in those circumstances where you might get to do a couple of weeks of work with someone in a class, and then in the next two weeks they are one of the three out of 10 who is not brought to you that day, and it is all disrupted.

Overall, we need to make sure that the education offered is more personalised and learner-centred. Particularly for those with higher levels of need, we need to make sure that there is a relationship with them, so you get a full picture of that need and do not overly rely on the initial assessment, which may not give you that full picture.

Annick Platt: Can I just pick up one other point? When talking about children, one thing we should not really be doing is retesting. If a child has been involved in education in the community, there is a wealth of information there. They might be on an education, health and care plan, and we need better links with local authorities to ensure that we actually continue that learner journey. We should not be starting from scratch with a child who has been engaged previously. We should have a seamless approach, and we should pick up and mirror that. We need to develop better links. We find it is good in some areas but patchy in others.

Jon Collins: That is going both ways—for people coming into custody but also for people leaving custody, so that we can make sure their needs are picked up in the community. As Annick mentioned, particularly if people have done part of a qualification, or have started a course, or have done something, we need to make sure they have the opportunity and the support to complete that. There is nothing more frustrating than starting something, if you are committed to it, and not being able to finish it.

Q105 **Pam Cox:** I just wanted to pick up on the question of funding and the extent to which that is a barrier to you in providing education in prisons.

Annick Platt: I have mentioned several times today that we are underfunded; we are not meeting the level of need that you see in the community. Funding is a barrier, especially when we do all the initial assessments, and we need to provide that opportunity. We just do not have the resource available to meet the need.



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Jon mentioned before about diversifying our offer to be more digital, and that is where we are starting to go in the future. We have a limited amount of resource where we have teachers who are face-to-face in the classroom with learners. That should be more for the learners with the highest need, who need that one-to-one support or small cohort group learning. We could then provide a wider digital offer for learners who could do some in-cell activity, so we can actually meet the needs of a greater number of learners, but still with the same amount of funding. That is the kind of development that we are going with now.

Q106 Pam Cox: Could I just ask for clarity, what is the value of the Novus contract currently?

Annick Platt: We have about £80 million across our sites, which is across all provisions: young people, Wales, private sector, everything.

Q107 Pam Cox: Those of us who are on the Committee more permanently have been to several prisons, and we have heard that workshops do not run and education sessions do not run. Although you have highlighted absenteeism or attendance issues within the sessions that run, I am also interested in pressing you on why sessions do not run when there is an £80 million contract behind some of that.

Annick Platt: Our vacancy rate at the moment is less than 5%. We have done some significant work over the past two years on our vacancy issues following covid. Lots of people struggled with vacancies. We have re-evaluated our terms and conditions for teachers to ensure that we attract people to prison education and maintain some good talent in prison education. We have a vacancy rate now of less than 5%, and we have a delivery rate of over 95%, which is the contract. In most of our sites we are hitting our service level agreement with the Prison Service, which is that we have to deliver more than 95%; there is a 5% tolerance.

On the whole across our sector, we are at a stage now—we have not been in years previously—where we are meeting those service levels. There are gaps. We find we have unexpected long-term sickness for some specialist courses that are hard to recruit to quickly and then get people through security clearance. We cannot rely on teacher banks or teacher pools in the community, where you can just quickly drop people in. We over-resource and have a good pool of colleagues. It has been a problem, but we are quite pleased that now we are seeing a more consistent level.

Q108 Pam Cox: What are those specialist courses where you have vacancies?

Annick Platt: Construction is often difficult. We are trying to find someone with trade experience and knowledge experience, who is also a qualified teacher. It is hard to find a fully qualified painter and decorator who is also a fully qualified teacher. We are doing a lot to work on how we can grow our own, upscale and bring people in with trade experience, and then deliver the qualifications ourselves to ensure that they become qualified teachers. Construction is always difficult to do. Some



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geographical areas like London are always challenging, perhaps because there is high churn with some learning support progression people—the TA equivalents. We find we hook them in, we engage them and then they move them on. We have geographical issues and then curriculum issues.

Q109 Pam Cox: I will just push that a little further. We went to Buckley Hall, and we visited a fantastic textile workshop, which was empty. It was suggested to us that one of the reasons why there was a lower uptake of the courses offered there was because there was not an accredited qualification attached to it. I know that in other prisons, they offer an NVQ certificate in manufacturing textiles and sewn products, for example. Novus was not offering that in that example. Talk us through why that could not be offered in a place like that.

Annick Platt: We deliver at Buckley Hall. We do not deliver the textile workshop; that is part of Prison Industries. That is a separate contract, which is delivered by Prison Service colleagues. That is delivered by instructional officers directly. Where funding allows, the Prison Service commissions our services. If it commissions us to go in and deliver those qualifications, we provide that offer—and we do in other areas. What you probably found at Buckley Hall is that there is a limited amount of provision. That provision is being commissioned for those who need it, level 2 and below, and there is not enough funding from the education contract to provide that wider offer in the textile industries for enhanced qualifications. Usually, the Prison Service and Prison Industries deliver their own qualifications, so the instructors will deliver their own qualifications.

Q110 Pam Cox: There is a whole raft of qualifications, are there not, in gym instructing, personal fitness, or sports coaching, which are being offered in really limited numbers, but which could be really transformative?

Annick Platt: Yes. We would love to do it all, but there are limited resources, and sometimes we have those difficult conversations. The Prison Service commissions that service. It does the annual delivery plan for each prison, it does the learner needs assessment, it writes the learning plan, it gives us the learning plan, and then we deliver what it commissions. We can be flexible, but when you have limited resources, you have to have those hard conversations about which needs you support.

Jon Collins: It is just worth adding that volume is not everything. It is obviously important that there are good quality courses and good quality qualifications, but we know that many fewer courses in total are completed year on year now than they were a decade or so ago, and resourcing is a huge part of that. There have not been increases in prison education funding. Our understanding is that when they roll out later this year, the new contracts will probably be even leaner, and the money will go only so far. When you are dealing with a cohort with very high levels of need, you have to make very difficult decisions. Everyone would like to



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offer something for everyone across every prison, but the resource simply is not there.

You had a prison governor talking about your drugs in prison inquiry, who mentioned that the money just was not available to make all the things available she wanted in her prison. If you travel around the country visiting prisons, that is a pretty common message: they know what the need is, and they know what they would like to do. Money is not endless; of course it is not. There is just not quite enough resource to do all the things you would like to do to provide the best opportunities for all the people you are working with, so choices have to be made.

Q111 Linsey Farnsworth: On that point, it sounds a bit like a prison postcode lottery, in terms of different prisons offering different types of courses. That is great, but obviously you may have a prisoner who really is drawn to construction—off the top of my head—and one prison offers that and the prison that he happens to go to does not. Are there any solutions or ideas of how that could be addressed? For example, could they apply for a move to a different prison, or is that just not something that would be surmountable?

Annick Platt: That potentially could happen. It does not at the moment. It does through the offending behaviour programmes, so if particular offenders need to do certain offending behaviour programmes, they are moved prisons to access that resource, maybe for a period of time, and then moved back to their prison in their local area. We do not do that from an education point of view, but that would be a great opportunity to have centres of excellence or hubs for construction or digital.

Also important is the ability to think differently with digital. We are now trying to think about our use of virtual reality. In four of our prisons at the moment we have Tenstar machines, which are virtual reality construction programmes where you can learn to be a forklift truck driver or you can do your HGV, which are all on a simulator. We now have portable ones that we can take around the prison. We can actually take courses and curriculums to other prisons. It is not always quite as cheap, but we can be more mobile with that—so a bit of a hybrid of both. But yes, we have always liked the idea of those centres of excellence and prisoners moving where the curriculum need is, a bit like you see in FEs and colleges as well.

Jon Collins: The only thing to add to that is, particularly in the open estate, there is the potential to make use of release on temporary licence. People can go out of prison during the day to study particular things that might not be available in their prison, whether that is FE, or in some cases at universities. There is real potential for that. It is used a lot less frequently than it could be. There are examples of where you have partnerships between prisons and local colleges, where the college comes in and offers things, but also if it is appropriate in terms of risk assessment, people are able to go out and study particular things, and that broadens the offer.



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Q112 Linsey Farnsworth: We heard in previous sessions that the number of temporary releases reduced, particularly since covid, and never really recovered from that. Would you like to see more use of that for educational purposes?

Jon Collins: Yes. It is mostly used at the moment for work, and that can be appropriate for a lot of people, but it can be used for education and training as well. At the moment, it is used very rarely, and as you say, less than it used to be pre-covid. There is more potential to do that. There are some challenges for prisons in making it happen, but where they can do that, it just opens up other opportunities that would not necessarily be available within a prison, particularly for people who are nearing release and may need particular qualifications or skills to move into a job when they leave.

Michala Robertson: Can I go back to the funding barrier question, please?

Chair: You may. I am just conscious of time; we are going to have to speed up a little.

Pam Cox: I am going to talk about contracts, and it could come in there, could it not?

Chair: We are going to go on to contracts in a minute, if you could hold that thought.

Q113 Tessa Munt: I wanted to ask about the six-year rule, if I may. The previous Education Committee recommended the lifting of the six-year rule. Can I have your opinion on that—particularly yours, Michala?

Michala Robertson: It is a nice segue because that was the funding barrier that I was going to mention. Prisons really struggle with education for longer-serving prisoners with longer terms. The six-year rule could really support education for longer-term prisoners. I have some statistics here on the value of removing that six-year rule. The MOJ reports that the annual cost per prisoner in England and Wales was £37,543 in 2017-18. If the six-year ruling came to an end, the OU estimate of the up-front cost of student loans for an extra 200 OU entrants is £2.3 million, but that is set against a potential saving to the public purse that could be nearly three times that even if loans were never repaid. For 200 OU student entrants gained, the estimated savings could be between £3 million and £6 million, again, even if the student loan is never repaid.

The benefit to longer-term prisoners in studying with the OU is that the skills, behaviours and attributes they develop can be a real benefit to the prison community. Many of our students take on roles in additional support, such as counsellors for the Listener scheme, Toe by Toe mentors for the reading and literacy scheme, education orderlies, OU ambassadors, and library orderlies. There is real value to higher education-level study for longer-term serving prisoners.



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Q114 **Tessa Munt:** Might I assume that all three of you would want the lifting of that six-year rule?

Annick Platt: Yes.

Jon Collins: We agree with that.

Q115 **Pam Cox:** There is a question around technology in prison education: in short, do you think it is being used to its full extent? It can be a yes or no answer.

Annick Platt: I will start. The technology in prisons is currently going through a transformation from the providers over to the Prison Service. The Prison Service will now take responsibility for all the digital infrastructure for the learning and skills offer as part of the digital education programme. That is now being rolled out across every prison. Hopefully it will be done by the end of September. They have done about 30 or so prisons at the moment.

That infrastructure is there, but there is a real need to invest more, not in basic digital, but in that ability to do something different. Talking about virtual reality, we are even talking to some private sectors about virtual reality headsets, so you can be on a construction site, in a hairdressing salon, in a theatre or wherever, and you can start learning the basic techniques. There needs to be more. There is much more that needs to happen.

Q116 **Pam Cox:** We are not currently delivering to the potential that we could. Is that what you are saying?

Annick Platt: No, we are not. There is so much more potential.

Q117 **Pam Cox:** I am looking at your website, which says, "By providing access to cutting-edge technology and training," you are providing prisoners with essential digital literacy skills and boosting confidence. How realistic is that actually? It is not the picture we have seen on our visits.

Annick Platt: The technology we have at the moment is good. The packages that we have, like I say, are moving from one to the other. Where we have technology in the classrooms, the technology that they can access through our platform is good. Teachers report that it is good. We have some good use of technology and some good use of AI to support teaching and learning. So yes, it is, but there is not enough of it. You will not see it everywhere. You went around Buckley Hall and some vocational areas; we could have a different mix of IT digital solutions alongside the construction one. It is limited at the moment.

Q118 **Pam Cox:** You said you are in 43 prisons, is that right?

Annick Platt: For the PEF contract.

Q119 **Pam Cox:** How many of those would have digital facilities like that?



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Annick Platt: All of them, and they have all been refreshed. We are in the process of being moved over from our solution to the Prison Service. They all will have digital, yes.

Q120 **Pam Cox:** In fact, I would like to bring the OU in, because I know you are online learners par excellence. You have managed to crack that model in prison. What is the challenge for scaling that up and allowing non-networked devices—tablets for prisoners—to have access to self-learning modules, online books and all these things? What are the barriers there?

Michala Robertson: As you have alluded to, we have what is called the OU walled garden, or the OU prison virtual learning environment, which is hosted on Virtual Campus and Virtual Campus 2.0. That is one of the first inroads for us with digital tech within prisons. We are also doing work with various digital tech providers around the UK, such as Coracle Inside, with our Chromebook mobile devices. The challenge is the prison infrastructure and that lack of willingness to be innovative. We often get told that because prisons are Victorian, they are unable to provide wi-fi. When you consider that you can get wi-fi in Parliament and even on the underground on my journey here today, that is not impossible.

The challenge for us is getting through those prison walls—metaphorically and practically. In my last Education Committee in 2021, I spoke about there being a lack of a joined-up approach for digital tech and digital education in the Prison Service and Ministry of Justice, and that there is no one clear strategy. For the OU to be able to offer all the digital and VLE options that we do, we have to source out individual providers who are working with the Ministry of Justice and individual prisons. There is not one clear way of working and not one clear strategy, and that would enormously help us.

Q121 **Pam Cox:** That brings us to contracts. Could you talk us through the contracting framework for education services in prison, broadly speaking?

Annick Platt: Prison education is often re-contracted every five years or so. In my 30 years, I have seen the start of the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service phases 1, 2, 3 and 4, and then the move into PEF, and now into PES. Every five to seven years, there is a whole re-contracting approach, where either the Ministry of Justice—or in the past the DFE and the Skills Funding Agency—have procured that service. It has been split up differently, and every new contract has a different term, whether it is geographically based or curriculum-based.

At the moment we are in something called lots. With the new Prison Education Service, we are right in the middle of a live procurement, so I cannot go into too much detail about it. It has 11 geographical lots available and £98 million-worth for 98 English prisons. That is currently what is being procured. That has a contract length of four years, with the option to extend for another three years dependent on contract performance.



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Our colleagues and other colleagues who teach in prison education are going through a potential TUPE situation every five to seven years, which is quite disruptive and quite difficult when we are trying to attract and keep prison education expertise. From a provider point of view, there is also not as much incentive to invest in the provision. If we had a longer contract like we do with the prison education transformation programme, where they contract out prisons on a 20 or 25-year contract, we would have some real longevity of service to significantly invest in new infrastructure or new digital solution, and we would not be constantly changing every five to seven years. That is the way it currently happens.

Q122 Pam Cox: Thank you for the overview. There are four major providers, I believe. You at Novus, Peopleplus, Weston College and Milton Keynes College, on the routine education. What are relations like between the four of you? Do you collaborate? Do you innovate together?

Annick Platt: We do. In particular, that has probably been really strengthened since covid. Following covid, we had weekly meetings with all four providers, and we have maintained those meetings on a regular basis. I meet with colleagues who do a similar operational role to me in the other four providers. It always gets difficult around re-procurement time, about who is going for different lots, but the collaboration is there, in particular on some curriculum development areas or our quality initiatives. Learners transfer from our establishments to their establishments, so it is in our interest to ensure that we align our curriculum offer or how we deliver. Collaboration is good, as much as it can be.

Q123 Pam Cox: I know we are a little short of time here, but one more from me. You talked about the Prison Education Framework, but we have not talked much about the Dynamic Purchasing System. Could you explain that to a lay member of the public who might be watching this?

Annick Platt: I do not want to dominate, but I am quite happy to take it. The Dynamic Purchasing System was new to PEF; it was something we had not seen prior in the OLASS provision. It was a new pot of funding that was available for prison governors to purchase ad hoc provision that perhaps they could not get through their core offer. In the past, I used to work for the Prison Service, and I was sometimes frustrated as a head of learning and skills that I could not buy in a drama production for a week to do a particular thing in this particular area, because it could not be contracted through the current provider.

The Dynamic Purchasing System was supposed to be a tool where governors could look at need and say, "Actually, I can get that from my core provider, but I'd like to commission something bespoke for a set period of time, or for a year, that's bespoke to my prison that I can go out and procure," and it has more flexibility to allow a wider range of providers to bid for that resource. We sometimes choose to bid for it, especially if it is around reading specialists that we have had, or SENCO provision. If we feel it is in our area of expertise, we will bid for that.



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Sometimes we choose not to. If it is around drama or other areas, we might leave that to another provider who has better specialisms to come in and deliver.

Jon Collins: It is really important in terms of enabling smaller organisations, specialist organisations, or local organisations to engage with prisons in a way that they would never be able to engage with a full lot of core education provision. They can bring in that expertise in areas that otherwise people in prison do not have access to, particularly sports, creative activities, drama—those sorts of things—but also things like peer reading schemes and really crucial work like that. It just gives prisons that flexibility to tailor their offer to the population that they are working with and their needs, and to try to make sure that there is a more rounded offer that offers a little more to people in prison.

At the moment contracts for that are a maximum of two years, to give that flexibility. I can see why they want to retain that flexibility, but it is difficult for providers to get something up and running in a two-year period and make the most of it, and then before you know it, their contract is coming to an end. There was a recommendation previously to look at extending the maximum length of those contracts. It is something to think about. We know it takes a while for organisations to get embedded into a prison and to get things operating.

Q124 **Pam Cox:** Would you say there is scope to review the whole contracting process in the prison estate?

Jon Collins: We are obviously about to go into a new set of contracts, so in a way, that question is being answered for the foreseeable future. There was a programme that was due to be set up at the same time as these contracts where five prisons were going to be taken out of the main education contracts, so they could test different approaches and try to find different ways to see how they worked. That was a really good idea, just to enable prisons to try different, more local approaches, or more tailored approaches.

That programme has been brought to a stop and is not going ahead at the moment. That is a missed opportunity to try other models and to see what else might have worked, particularly in terms of enabling prisons to work with local providers to provide a greater variety, as well as specialists who obviously have that long-term knowledge in terms of providing prison education. You do need to get that balance, but we would have liked to have seen that opportunity taken to innovate and to try things.

Q125 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Back in September 2023, the previous Government announced Prison Education Service reforms. How have recent reforms, including the recruitment of a head of education, skills and work and a neurodiversity support manager within prisons, helped to improve educational outcomes? I will go to Jon for that.



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Jon Collins: Those two particular reforms that you mentioned—the introduction of the new senior-level post focusing on education and the neurodiversity support managers—were both things that we welcomed and thought were a positive step. We have heard already about the high levels of people with neurodiverse needs in prison, so bringing in a specialist to work on that has real value. Bringing in new heads of education, skills and work, people with educational knowledge and expertise to support the governor and the senior management team, ensuring that the curriculum and the education provision works for their prison, has real value.

It is quite early days in terms of embedding those reforms, and many of those new people coming in did not come from a prison background—some came from schools or adult education. It is too early to say that it has had a transformational impact on outcomes, but where we have seen it working well in some prisons, it is helping to improve and embed that partnership between the prison and the education provider, which is so important. If you want this to work well, the prison has to enable the education provider to do its job, and the education provider has to work with the prison to give it the information it needs. Having someone who works for the prison but really gets the educational bit of it as well can have real value in improving that partnership, because where that partnership does not work well, and the two are not working smoothly together, you are never going to get good quality education provision. If those roles over time can develop to help to manage that partnership and help it to work appropriately, that will have real value.

Michala Robertson: I have nothing to add. I agree with Jon.

Annick Platt: As Jon said, the ability to work in partnership with the heads of education, skills and work is critical. Where we see that working well, we have seen some positive, good Ofsted inspections. In Haverigg, Moorland, Askham Grange, we have some really good partnerships, and they have all been graded good.

For us as a provider to be successful in a prison, we have to have that partnership. It is not our environment; it is not like an FE sector where we own the building, and it is our college. We deliver a service in someone else's environment. We need partnership and collaboration and that word "enable" that Jon used: we have to be enabled to deliver a successful contract. Hold us to account for the quality of teaching and learning, but enable us to deliver the best service possible. We welcome those roles, because those roles are about working out in the prison and engaging not just within education, but with the residential units to ensure that we can increase attendance. So yes, we welcome those roles because we need those roles to enable us to be successful.

Q126 **Mrs Brackenridge:** From your experience, how well is the head of education, skills and work liaising with the governor of prisons? The intention was that they would work shoulder to shoulder, hand in glove



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with each other. Is that the reality?

Annick Platt: It is different in every prison. A lot of the heads of education, skills and work are managed by the governor and are part of the governor's senior leadership team in a prison, which is critical. Often our education managers are also part of the senior leadership team, which is great as well. That relationship is there; it is an evolving role, and they need some more support and guidance nationally in collaboration with each other. But yes, I have seen some good, positive working in those relationships with the governor.

Q127 **Mrs Brackenridge:** The ultimate ambition for this Government's approach is to deliver improved educational outcomes. Being a bit more solutions-focused now and focusing on best practice, are there particular examples that you could share with us today, starting with Annick?

Annick Platt: Yes, we often look at best practice and how we share that across our own prison network and with the other providers. We have talked about our collaboration with the other providers. We held a big conference where we got all the providers together, and we shared some good practice that we do across the sector.

In our Yorkshire-based model, at the moment under the PEF contract we have an end-to-end provision where we deliver all the CIAG at the start, we deliver all the core education and all the vocational offer, but then we have an additional resource called our Novus Works team where we support offenders through the gate into employment. We pick them up, do all the assessment, do the skills development, but then when they are ready, we actually hand-hold them into the community. We go and support them in the community, and we support the employers because that is critical. We have to talk to the employers and make them feel comfortable employing an ex-offender. Actually, our research with our employer network says nine out of 10 of them will employ an ex-offender and feel them beneficial to their workforce. We have put over 1,000 learners so far into employment from that service in Yorkshire since we created it. That end-to-end provision is critical to support the learner right through that whole learner journey.

Jon Collins: Ofsted inspections are the best independent assessment we have of how good prison education is. Relatively few of them in recent years have been good and none were outstanding. We need to look at where prisons are achieving a good rating and decide what lessons we can draw from that. Over the last months and years there have been some prisons—particularly in the open estate, but elsewhere—that have achieved a good rating overall and good under different judgments. It is really important that the Prison Service as a whole learns from what it is achieving and takes those lessons into other prisons so they can make sure the best practice spreads that way.

In general, prisons are not always brilliant at sharing best practice between different prisons. While the providers obviously run across



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several prisons and may collaborate with other providers, we need to make sure that best practice is being shared from the prison side as well. Ofsted is now working much more with prison governors to talk through the results of its inspections. That is really positive. We would like to see more of that sharing of best practice and enabling prisons that are struggling to learn from those that are doing better, because there are some examples of good practice out there. We need to make sure they are not confined to one prison or one area but are shared around the estate.

Michala Robertson: Examples for the OU in terms of higher education are our prisons where we have dedicated OU wings, or we have dedicated time—dedicated purposeful activity that is organised with an individual governor or head of learning, skills and work. We will have an ICT suite where perhaps OU has donated ICT equipment, and we will have Open University student councils that contribute to the running of the regime of the prison. It is very much dependent on a flexible and open approach to higher-level education and providing prisoners with the ability to spend time in an ICT suite, or a library, where they can meet and really drive forward either their Open University learning or something that is really beneficial to the prison.

Q128 **Mrs Brackenridge:** With rehabilitation in mind, what one recommendation could you give to improve educational outcomes for rehabilitation, starting with Annick?

Annick Platt: I want very much just to ensure that this Justice Committee really understands the significant impact prison education can have. We talked about the research that proves it has an impact on reducing reoffending. We have to have that conversation about levelling up that funding. If there is four times the need in prison than there is in the community, but the community has 17% more provision for that level 2 or below than custody, we need a conversation about levelling up that funding for us to ensure that we can actually have an impact on those who need it most.

Jon Collins: As I have mentioned already, it is a move towards a more learner-centred, flexible approach that takes individuals with the needs they have and where they are at that time and helps them move towards what they want to achieve in prison, and when they leave. If you want to have that more individual-focused, learner-focused approach, you are looking at resources, you are looking at recruiting and retaining the very best quality teachers and support staff, and you are looking at digital. It is an across-the-piece package of improvements, but you need to put the learner right at the centre of that to ensure that their particular needs are understood and met as they move through the prison estate and their prison journey.

Michala Robertson: For me, prisons have been really successful and made a lot of progress by applying the principle of equivalence to health care and working with health care trusts. I would like to consider that for



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education. I would like prisons working with education providers such as those here today to apply that principle of equivalence, so that we are modelling in our adult prisons and our young adult prisons what adult education is like outside. We would be on a winning streak.

Q129 Linsey Farnsworth: I am interested in continuing education on release. We have all heard from you that there is clear evidence that education within prisons assists with reducing reoffending on the outside. I think it was you, Annick, who talked about the risk of early release under certain schemes in emergency situations like we have seen with the SDS40, which caused concerns for you in terms of recidivism. Would it be fair to say that continuing and finishing courses that have not been finished—particularly OU courses, which tend to be quite a long commitment for learning—is central to reducing reoffending for individuals?

Annick Platt: Absolutely. We then need to work with our community providers to ensure that that is accessible at a time when the offenders need it. We know at the moment that community provision has cohort learning, which would often start in September. If we have an offender that is leaving about now, what are we going to do until then? It is about the ability to engage in something in the community to continue that learning journey because any gap in learning is a real risk for reoffending. Any continuation that is seamless into community provision or supported in the interim is definitely beneficial.

Jon Collins: Yes, I absolutely agree with that. First, I mentioned before about how partnerships between prisons and FE colleges, universities and the communities they are going to be releasing people into, help to deal with bridging that gap. That would look at both what people might do in the interim, but also—as I mentioned before—using release on temporary licence, so that people do not miss the start of a class if they can be released a few months early. That happens, and there is a provision for that in the rules, but it could happen a lot more and we would like to see more of it. If you have those strong partnerships, people will understand what is required of them, and that will enable them to be more likely to be picked up as they go out into the community.

Secondly, at the moment, statistics are published routinely on the proportion of people leaving prison who go into employment, but there is no equivalent for those people who go into education and training in the time after they leave prison. I get that it is a more difficult dataset to gather, but it would be valuable if we are thinking of the equivalent of people not in education, employment or training. It would be really useful to think about what proportion of people are going into education or training and to recognise that is a valid outcome for some people leaving prison. It may be that by completing a course, or by doing a course when they leave prison, or a qualification of some kind, they have better long-term outcomes than rushing straight into a job without completing a course they have started.

Q130 Linsey Farnsworth: That is really interesting because we are talking



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about NEETs quite a lot at the moment: people not in education, employment or training. It is really interesting that there is no data collected specifically on prison release on that point.

Michala Robertson: For the OU, being online and distance learning, it is fairly seamless if somebody is released, and we enable them to continue their study in the community. Although we have seen an increase in early release, that has not hampered us. All we then do is transfer that learning. If an OU prisoner student has certain licence conditions within the community, we are able to provide them with the same secure VLE they experienced in prison and the same secure curriculum. It is a fairly seamless transition for us.

Because we can never know, and prisons do not always know, when someone is going to be released, we also make sure that on registration with the Open University we provide the learners with a through-the-gate learner pack. This has all the contact details and all the URLs that they need to access once they are in the community, if they are not under licence or are not being reported to us as being released. It is fairly seamless. It is not without fault, but it is a fairly positive picture for us.

Q131 Linsey Farnsworth: That in itself is an example of best practice when it works, and it sounds like it is a really good scheme or system that you have there generally. Are there any other examples of good practice, and are there any other opportunities that you can see that would help to support prison leavers into the community continuing with their education? Are there any gaps and opportunities, or do you have any examples of where something is happening that is going particularly well, beyond the one that you have already given us?

Michala Robertson: Again, for us it is the pockets of work we are doing with digital technology and digital education providers. Our idea is that devices are then gifted to OU students to take them through the gate, so they have their record of learning on there, they have all the assistive software they need, and they can just continue their learning on that device once released.

Annick Platt: The ability to use some of the apprenticeship framework now would be definitely beneficial for offenders leaving custody. We have a pilot now working with the Prison Service, and they have changed some the legislation around apprenticeships. That is in its early stages, but it could really take off because that apprenticeship routeway for a lot of our offenders is very successful.

Q132 Linsey Farnsworth: The requirement to have GCSE English and maths has been removed, so does that open up apprenticeships now?

Jon Collins: I will answer very briefly. For the learners we fund, they own the course that they do, so they can continue it in the community, and we will help them to smooth that journey if required. We run an advice line; people can call us and ask for help to recontact their course



supplier and continue with their course. It is obviously often a very disruptive time, but we try to support people who want to do that.

There are other examples of good practice. For example, in Gloucestershire there is a partnership between a prison and an FE college, which provides a personal training-type qualification. They work with prison leavers and provide wraparound support, career guidance and support towards achieving the qualification. There are these pockets and bits of best practice. As I mentioned earlier, one of the challenges is that often no one knows about them. They go on in isolation because an enterprising governor or local FE college principal makes them happen because they think it is a really good thing to do, but you do not hear about them, so they do not get replicated elsewhere.

Q133 Linsey Farnsworth: A more joined-up approach for re-entry into the community might be useful, would you say?

Jon Collins: Absolutely. We talked about the new senior roles. Part of their role is within the prison looking in at what they are doing. We would also like to see the heads of education, skills and work looking out and thinking about what they can bring in from the community, which both broadens the offer and potentially brings in additional resource.

For example, there is an open prison that has a partnership with a local FE college, and the FE provision is funded from the adult education budget, not from the prison budget. People go out to that on a daily basis on ROTL, and that is an additional resource the prison would not have access to otherwise. Developing those sorts of partnerships and looking at how they work so that other people can learn from them, and maybe not exactly replicate them because every prison is different but learn the lessons from them and develop something similar, would have real benefits.

Q134 Linsey Farnsworth: Would you like to see links with businesses on the outside as well, taking people through perhaps with apprenticeships, or some sort of link where local businesses might support funding for education in the prison and then jobs on the outside when they come out?

Annick Platt: Yes, absolutely, and that is happening now. Our curriculum offer, in particular around some vocational training, is all something we call employer-endorsed. It is often branded as their department. We have a Greene King academy that we will use and develop, and then it will progress into the Greene King community. We used to have a Pret academy through Pret A Manger. We work with Fred Sirieix at the Right Course, and that works into all the hospitality and catering industry. All our curriculum offers are employer-endorsed. Sometimes that is just the employer giving us some guidance about the curriculum design, and then the nth degree is where they take them through the gate and employ them directly in their business. The more of that the better, because that routeway into business is critical.



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Q135 **Linsey Farnsworth:** We have some MPs sitting here thinking about the businesses in their constituencies that might be able to help.

Annick Platt: Yes, definitely.

Jon Collins: I agree with that. That sort of work is really valuable. As you will know, there have been employment advisory boards set up in prisons to try to improve the link between prisons and employers. There are also going to be regional employment councils trying to do the same thing. All that work is really valuable. An essential part of it is making sure that where people are doing courses—particularly qualifications in prison—they are the qualifications and experiences that employers want, so that people do not spend their time and energy doing a course and then find out when they get out that it does not really have any value. Part of our work is making sure that our courses are the right ones. You need to see that across the whole estate so that when people get out, the qualification they have has actual value in the community.

Q136 **Tessa Munt:** You mentioned a helpline, do you run helplines that are free?

Jon Collins: We run a free advice line, so it is free for people in prison to call if they have questions.

Q137 **Tessa Munt:** Not when you are in prison, when you are out.

Jon Collins: The courses that we provide are provided only to people in prison, but if someone has left prison and wants to call us to ask about the course they were doing in prison, we will take that call from them, of course we will.

Q138 **Tessa Munt:** Is it free?

Jon Collins: Yes, it is free within prison or outside.

Q139 **Tessa Munt:** You were talking about effectively gifting the kit—the equipment. Is that common, and can they take their equipment from one prison to another when they are moved? Does their kit go with them?

Michala Robertson: Again, it depends on the individual prison, but the idea is that that device moves with them for the duration of their study.

Q140 **Tessa Munt:** They can literally pick it up and take it with them, so they do not have the break.

Michala Robertson: Correct. Funding for that is raised through philanthropic endeavour through the Open University.

Chair: Thank you very much everyone, particularly our witnesses. You can see how much we value your testimony, as we have overrun by about half an hour. Thank you very much indeed for coming along and sharing your expertise with us. We have a second panel of prison education experts—not that you were not. Thank you for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lee Owston, Dr Jo Grady and Victoria Barnett.

Q141 **Chair:** We resume the Justice Committee this afternoon with our second panel of experts in prison education. I will ask them briefly to introduce themselves, starting with Mr Owston.

Lee Owston: I am one of His Majesty's inspectors and Ofsted's national director for education.

Dr Grady: I am the general secretary of UCU, which represents educators in post-16 education and specifically in prisons.

Victoria Barnett: I am the chair of the CILIP Prison Libraries Group, and I manage five prison libraries in Kent.

Q142 **Chair:** We are very grateful for your attendance this afternoon. There are a number of members of the Justice Committee, and Mark Swards and Sureena Brackenridge are guesting from the Education Committee this morning, but we will all have a few questions for you. I am going to start off with one or two general questions. What role do you believe supporting prisoners' educational outcomes has in supporting efforts towards rehabilitation?

Lee Owston: It is absolutely crucial. Ofsted exists to raise standards and improve lives. If we are not doing that as a nation, particularly for our most disadvantaged and vulnerable, we are not doing the job that we need to do. As an inspectorate, we see a very clear disconnect between the ambition we all have for education to be truly transformative and what that means for prisoners in terms of rehabilitation and resettlement, and the reality of what we see on the ground. To give you a few headline figures from our inspections last year, 86% of prisons—where we evaluate prison education—were less than good; just over half were inadequate, and there were no outstanding providers. They were exceptionally weak in terms of the quality of prisoner education. That is why we are really pleased to be contributing to the Committee's evidence collection.

Dr Grady: Before I get on to that, I just want to say something by way of introduction to set things in context. At UCU, we represent 120,000 people across post-16 education; 1,000 of those are prison educators. It was interesting to hear the earlier panel because I do not think the remarkable and sometimes demanding and dangerous job that prison educators do was fully acknowledged. I want to put on record our appreciation for them, and I am sure that is shared by the Committee.

As a precondition to most of what I will say today, the lack of valuing of prison educators, the lack of focus on their working conditions, and in particular the contracting-out system, which has reinforced low pay and led to a professional body that does not have autonomy, have made things worse. It is very difficult to deliver education and be focused on



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rehabilitation when you work within a system where every four to five years you are potentially contracted out and go through TUPE. One of the mechanisms that providers are judged on is whether they are offering a service cheaply. The person who is squeezed in the middle of that is the worker. We see that the contracting-out system squeezes as much value out of the staff who deliver education rather than supporting them in what they do. I know we are going to get into this more and that you have seen the evidence. In a survey we did, one of our members gave us a quotation, saying, "I want to rehabilitate inmates not fulfil a company contract at any cost." We feel this contracting out gets in the way of us doing proper rehabilitation in the UK, and in England specifically.

Victoria Barnett: I do not have much to add to that. Where the library is positioned is not formal education as such; it is an opportunity for people to do some self-learning, discover more about themselves, and find things that interest them and take them on into the future. We have a lot of problems with people not being able to get to the library and lots of feedback from prisoners about the psychological impact that has on them in terms of their ability to serve their time in a positive way. Library time is the most decent, civilised part of the week, as the library is the only calm place in the prison, and that is something that we need to build on.

Chair: Thank you very much. I might have other questions later, but I will now bring in Mark Swards.

Q143 **Mark Swards:** Thank you, Chair. Lee, you have already mentioned the figure of 86% of all inspections—was that within five years?

Lee Owston: That is just over the last year.

Q144 **Mark Swards:** That is just over the last year. Something like 87% of all inspections over the last five years have been inadequate or requires improvement, so the state of prison education is not good. What needs to be done to improve it?

Lee Owston: That is a good question. There are some practical issues that do not even touch on the quality of education itself. At the start of the previous panel, the Chair mentioned physical barriers and whether there are enough activity spaces. If you have a classroom that fits 15 prisoners but far more need education, how do you manage that? When there are enough spaces, are they used to their best effect? There are shortages of people who are not only qualified but want to teach in that space. Equally, if you have fewer prison officers, you cannot escort prisoners from their wing or their cell to where the learning is happening. Those are physical barriers that do not even touch on the quality once prisoners are in the classroom or accessing vocational learning.

There needs to be a greater investment in training—previous panel members picked up on this—and equity across the education landscape in terms of whether you get the same amount of pay if you are an FE tutor



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working in a prison versus in a school. If you are a highly qualified teacher, where do you best see your skills being used? As the previous panel members said, the range of provision is not as broad as it needs to be; it is very narrow in terms of those first entry qualifications and does not allow prisoners to progress to wherever else they might want to go in their education.

Q145 Mark Sowards: Before I move on to ask the other panel members, is there a core or central reason that keeps coming up as to why so many provisions are being declared inadequate?

Lee Owston: I question whether there is true investment in education against all the other priorities that governors and leadership teams have across the prison estate. Does every governor see education as important as the safety of prisoners, funding or overcrowding and so on? There is something about leadership and management, and also constancy: are things there long enough to instigate change and see it through, or is there constant churn and new people bringing in new ideas before others have had time to embed?

Q146 Mark Sowards: That is interesting. You would say it is about the leadership of the prisons as opposed to the safeguarding. I was a maths teacher in another life, and often safeguarding in schools is the No. 1 reason that they tend to become inadequate; but when it comes to prisons, it is actually leadership and management.

Lee Owston: It is about the priority that is put on education. I question whether we have been swift enough, particularly in terms of reading. We produced a report three years ago this month, and its recommendations are being very slowly implemented, but there have been only minimal gains across those last three years.

Q147 Mark Sowards: To the other panel members, in your view, what are the barriers to the take-up of prison education by prisoners? What is stopping people who want to take up education in prisons from doing so?

Dr Grady: There are a few things I would highlight. One that you discussed earlier is attendance. From our perspective, consistent data is not collected on the lack of attendance in prisons. From our research, there are two broad reasons. One is a chronic and persistent shortage of prison officers. If you can imagine, prisoners are often taken from their wing and then held in a room, and then they are taken to the classroom. If there is a shortage of prison officers, that just will not happen. We see that as a huge barrier.

Another is the rather punitive restrictions that you have in prisons around toilet breaks. You can imagine this as an educator: prisoners are only allowed a single toilet break in a three-hour session. Sometimes they are taken off the wing up to an hour before attending that session. Many prisoners will cite this as a reason that they do not attend. I will not rehearse them in front of you, but we have had some pretty appalling



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stories from our educators of students urinating in classrooms. It is a reason students do not attend.

Another reason students do not get what they should in the classroom is low pay. We have chronic low pay in prison education. In England, college lecturers are paid less than schoolteachers, and our prison lecturers are paid even less. We have courses that students do not know if they will run, or people leave. It is really poor for students.

The prison estate is another reason that is crucial for this Committee to consider. If you think about trauma-informed education, which we heard about a few times in the earlier session, it is a meaningless phrase if it is not delivered efficiently or meaningfully. As an example, one of our members told us they delivered horticulture classes. For some students, that is the kind of teaching they need and is education that they engage in. Students were able to develop proper skillsets using patches outside that they could go and learn in. Without any consultation, these were bulldozed, and now that person has to teach inside using pots.

I return to the contracting out, which essentially means that these things are renegotiated. I am really sorry that I cannot remember which Committee member asked the colleague from Novus why some things are available here but not there, but we do not have either the MOJ or the DFE saying, "Here are the things that learners should have access to and here is how we are going to ensure that every learner can have access to that." At the moment, instead we have four—soon it will be three—different providers competing with each other and effectively trying to be the lowest-cost provider possible, and education is just not at the forefront of that. All those things combined present huge barriers to students in prisons.

Q148 Mark Sowards: Victoria, do you have anything to add about what would stop prisoners from taking up education right now?

Victoria Barnett: A lot of it is educational trauma—not wanting to go back into a classroom. People will come to the library and be happy to teach themselves in their own way, slowly. We had a woman in our female prison who learned to read completely from just borrowing children's books, and her cellmate taught her to read. By the time she left prison, she had read hundreds of books. She was our biggest reading group member.

One of the biggest barriers for people getting to the library is staff in prisons. If there is a shortage of staff in another area of the prison, the library officer will be the first to be taken away. People only get 20 minutes in the library, and that may be once a week. If they are very lucky, their wing might get twice a week and they might get on to that list again. But the limited number of times they can come to the library is severely impacted when they take away that officer for no good reason, or no reason that is told to the prisoners, so they get really frustrated. There are also contracting issues in that our library services are very



patchy across the country. There are brilliant prison libraries and there are not-so-brilliant prison libraries. There is no standardisation or benchmark to work to, and the contracts do not reflect that.

Dr Grady: Could I add something else on special educational needs, which came up in the last panel? We know that special educational needs has had increased funding. We are better at spotting it and encouraging parents to spot it. Therefore, as a society, we have higher rates of diagnosis now. In our experience, this is not a trend that you see carried into the prison population in terms of extra investment, extra resources, and therefore, extra time for learners with special educational needs. Given that we know there are disproportionately higher levels of neurodivergence and special educational needs in prisons, you then have a prison workforce that is dealing with classrooms with a disproportionately high level of those needs but with less investment, with staff who are less invested in, and as you have just highlighted, with less access to the things that would be helpful. Despite the fact that we know this is a trend across society that we are better at spotting, we have not copied that across into prison education whatsoever.

Q149 Linsey Farnsworth: Dr Jo, you have hit on something that is really important to me and my colleagues in Derbyshire. Lee will know that Derbyshire county council and the ICB have recently failed quite dramatically an Ofsted report on their SEND provision, so I am really interested to hear what you say. MOJ data shows that 55% of prisoners had learning difficulties or disabilities when they took their initial assessment on entry into prison. Dr Jo, you said we are getting better as a society on the outside. I am not asking you, Lee, to comment on Derbyshire specifically, but in an area where children do not have the same SEND provision they are entitled to on the outside, what is the impact inside prisons that are dealing with potential offenders coming through the system?

Victoria Barnett: Basically, a lot of the prisoners that we know have special educational needs are not diagnosed on the outside. They come in and they tell us that they have those needs, but they are not diagnosed on the outside. From what I understand, the neurodiversity managers are doing a great job but they are not allowed to diagnose people with those special needs. They can have some support in place that they think they might need, but I do not think they are allowed to diagnose.

Dr Grady: If I can give you personal anecdotes from our educators, in 2019, when I was first elected as general secretary, I spoke to one of our members who was a remarkable prison educator. She was the daughter of a mother who had also been a prison educator. I remember speaking to her about how dangerous prisons are, that there is no soap and water—basic things that you would expect—and that she had to take her own toilet roll to work with her. As a fellow teacher, I said to her, “I know the answer as to why people carry on teaching when it is hard, but why do you keep on doing it?” She worked with young men in a youth



offender estate, and she said, "Because when I teach young men how to read, they are going home able to read stories, bedtime stories, to their children. And I know that I am making a huge change and a difference to the trajectory of their lives and to the trajectory of their children and potentially other people in their communities." That woman is no longer a prison educator because she could not stay in a job that was so low paid, despite being so intergenerationally committed to it.

So, I agree, there are people coming to prison that are not diagnosed, but there are people who come into this profession to stay and are dedicated. With all respect to our colleague from Novus earlier, I was staggered to hear some of the things she said about low pay, because Novus are part of the issue as to why pay is so low in prison education as well as the funding. There are multiple things that are connected that we could address in a better way.

Q150 Mark Sowards: In the interest of time, I will keep it brief. My question is to Lee again and is changing track a little. The chief inspector of Ofsted said, "It cannot be right that some children spend up to 23 hours each day alone in their cells with no access to education or other pursuits that might improve their chances of rehabilitation". Why is the picture of education in youth offender institutes so bleak, especially since we have actually had a decrease in the youth custody population?

Lee Owston: I do not think it is prioritised. Going back to my previous answer to you about leadership and management, particularly in the young offender institutions, we are lucky if we see a governor for a year before they are moved on somewhere else. So, in the establishments where we need to or potentially can make the greatest difference for reoffending, and ultimately for where they may end up in terms of prison, we are not dedicating that focused leadership management time to get things right.

There are significant issues around behaviour in YOIs, which is why you hear about children being locked behind closed doors for too many hours of the day and unable to access classrooms or education. Some of that comes back to how well equipped staff feel to deal with the most challenging behaviours, such as physical violence and verbal abuse. The easiest solution is not necessarily to train staff to deal with those issues but to separate those young people.

Indeed, education in those institutions is not designed in the right way in that decisions are made—linked back to behaviour—about where children should be and what they should learn based on whether they can be in the same room as another young offender, not on whether that is something they need to learn next. The safety of staff and other young offenders is taken as the priority rather than what they are learning in the first place.

Q151 Mark Sowards: Have you seen any best practice at all that you think could be applied to organisations where it is not working?



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Lee Owston: Of the three YOIs, two are inadequate and one requires improvement, so it is very difficult to pinpoint best practice to support the system.

Mark Sowards: Thank you for your answer.

Q152 **Tessa Munt:** I want to reverse a little and go back to something you said about the assessment of special educational needs. If I am right, Victoria, you said that prisoners came in who had not been assessed but they told you what their experience was.

Victoria Barnett: Yes—what they believe, but they have not had an official diagnosis.

Q153 **Tessa Munt:** I am checking my understanding of what was said in a previous session, which was, as prisoners enter the system, they are assessed. What does that mean? Is that just somebody going, “Well, I think you’ve got this; and I think you’ve got that?”, or are they professionals?

Victoria Barnett: I think they are tested for maths and English. We will have to come back on that one.

Q154 **Tessa Munt:** Could you write to the Chair about that?

Victoria Barnett: Yes.

Q155 **Tessa Munt:** I want to really understand, because I have misunderstood. I thought that an assessment was done by somebody who—you are shaking your heads; that is very alarming.

Victoria Barnett: That is not my understanding.

Q156 **Tessa Munt:** Is this just some prisoner officer going, “Can you read? Can you write? Can you add up?”?

Victoria Barnett: No, there are now neurodiversity managers in prisons. That is a fairly new role.

Q157 **Tessa Munt:** How are they qualified?

Victoria Barnett: I do not know.

Q158 **Tessa Munt:** Could we check that, please? Do you know the answer?

Lee Owston: They would not be qualified to diagnose in the way that an educational psychologist would within the wider education system.

Q159 **Tessa Munt:** Is an assessment done by an ed psych?

Lee Owston: From inspection experience, it is typically a screening check that is at the very minimum level often, “Can you read or not?” and education is then planned from that perspective.

Dr Grady: There is also the reality of the contracted-out education in the understaffed prison. People will say, “We provide this,” and you teased it



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out quite nicely with the technology in the earlier session. There will be statements about what we do, and there is what practically happens on the ground. If there are no prison officers to transport someone to an assessment, it might happen at some point in the future, or there may be a much more superficial assessment than you would expect. That is the reality of prison education.

Q160 Tessa Munt: I would be very grateful if the three of you would write to the Chair about your perception or experience of what actually happens because what I heard before sounded quite nice, and I am slightly alarmed now.

Dr Grady: You are right to be alarmed, though. In my opinion, the continuation of contracted-out education in prisons is not compatible with delivering rehabilitation. What you have is a system of different providers making commitments to do things which, to be fair to them, they are not always in control of because they are not in control of understaffing in prisons. But education is not at the forefront, so they have students turn up or not turn up and staff deliver to students who are either there or not there. There are no rehabilitative goals woven into the fabric of what they do.

Lee Owston: Can I add one thing? It comes back to Linsey's point on SEND, which I did not get to answer. As an organisation, we absolutely want to be better at joining the dots. We inspect everything from childminders all the way through early years, schools, colleges, apprenticeships and obviously up to prison education. We need to be better at knowing where learners fall through the gaps and then what we can report back to Parliament and others in terms of where to turn our attention next. We need to be much better at using information from area SEND inspections to better identify where institutional-level practice needs to be even better. That is what we propose to do better in the future.

Tessa Munt: You are saying you need to find out where the dots are, and we do not even have that.

Chair: I need to move on. Pam, I was going to come to you anyway.

Q161 Pam Cox: Returning to contracting prison education, Lee, in your view in your Ofsted capacity, does the current commissioning framework work well to provide education services to prisoners?

Lee Owston: That is a difficult question for me to answer on behalf of an inspectorate because we do not look at commissioning in terms of the inspections that we undertake; we look at the quality of the education that prisoners receive, whoever delivers that. We focus on the impact that it has. We do not look at the commissioning process, although the inspection statistics, where only eight prisons out of the last 35 had good quality of education, give you an indication of what that offer looks like. But we do not inspect at commissioning level.



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Q162 **Pam Cox:** To recap what you said in one of your opening answers, 86% of prison education in the last year was found to be less than good, and a decent proportion of that was found to be inadequate. As a former educator myself, that suggests to me that the framework that is delivering is somehow not performing.

Lee Owston: The estate is looking at how to improve that. As a previous panellist said, there are new commissions being undertaken as we speak. It is in the process of going through.

Q163 **Pam Cox:** Just to push a little more on that, the 2023-24 annual report by HMI Prisons said prison leaders struggled “to hold their education providers to account where services were ineffective.” Do you have a view on why that might be?

Lee Owston: In terms of accountability, there is no mechanism. As I said, we do not look at commissioning; therefore, it does not contribute to our evidence collection in terms of asking how that relationship is working. We simply report on whether it is making a difference for prisoners or not.

Q164 **Pam Cox:** Jo, you have indicated a view on commissioning; perhaps you would reiterate it here. UCU has called for a comprehensive review of the curriculum and contracting framework before the Prison Education Service is implemented. Why are you arguing that?

Dr Grady: There are a few reasons. The Prison Education Service, and the PEF before, is just a tendering process, which does not put the issues you have been asking about at the heart of what happens. One aspect of that is the way in which PES seeks, in quite a punitive way, to claw back 10% of funding from providers if teaching hours are lost. There are some things I will not defend teaching providers for, but lost teaching is not one of them; they are not in control of that, and it just seems a bizarre thing to do. The voice of the prison education workforce has not been consulted about this; we have been excluded from the panel. We want to equip learners not just to re-enter the workforce but to be rehabilitated and have a broader engagement with the curriculum. The contracting-out framework easily reduces education to just box-ticking and benchmarking over rehabilitation.

We need to entrench different things in prison education—for example, to allow flexible teaching practices. You discussed the benefits of that before and attending to the emotional and psychological needs as well as the intellectual potential of students in prison—to develop soft skills as well as emotional resilience, to build critical thinking capabilities and to encourage reading for pleasure. These things are not really compatible with the system as it currently stands, which is why we think there needs to be a comprehensive review before it is rolled out.

I will say one more thing about the perpetual contracting in this cycle of every four to six years. At the moment, two of the providers going forward are colleges, so the staff that get taken on by those colleges will



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have access to the teachers' pension scheme. If they have been in the TPS, those who end up going to PeoplePlus will be TUPE'd out of it. It is not just bad for learners and for the state of prison education; as their union, we are either going to have to enter into some kind of dispute for those staff to remain in the pension scheme, or they are going to be transferred out. They could be transferred back in four to five years' time. There are so many aspects of it that do not work.

Q165 Pam Cox: Is that Weston College and Milton Keynes College?

Dr Grady: Yes. PeoplePlus is the private provider, and Novus is part of the LTE group with Manchester College. For us, the DFE is the home where education should sit. I forget her name now, but our colleague from the Open University said we should model this on healthcare. We do not have all private providers in healthcare. If we were going to model it on healthcare, we would say either the MOJ or the DFE should set the standards and say, "This is how we expect the money to be spent and this is what we want our learners to have access to, and these are the educational pedagogical priorities that we want them to have." Instead, we have this absolute mess. I am picking on Novus a bit because they were here, but we have chronically low pay for our teachers in prison education. They are walking out of the door, and yet the very senior managers in our education providers are on £220,000 to £240,000. I am not saying there is loads of profit being creamed off in prison education, but there are a lot of very senior well-paid people, and those who deliver this on the ground and do really tricky jobs under difficult circumstances are not.

Victoria Barnett: There are all these different providers—I have been through quite a few in my time—but they do not seem to have a very different offering. It does not matter who does the education provision if the prison does not back it. Senior managers can back it, and in my experience, heads of education, skills and work have been really good and have improved access to education. But, if you have officers who do not see the point of education and of sending people to the library, and who do not get them out of their cell, wake them up and say, "Come on, it's time to go now," it does not matter how good your education provision or how brilliant your library is. If people are not getting there, it is a waste of money.

Chair: That is a good cue because, Linsey, you have some questions on libraries.

Q166 Linsey Farnsworth: I have some questions about prison libraries. I was celebrating World Book Day with my children last week and having long conversations about reading for pleasure. I was heartened to read in our brief that the Prison Rules 1999 say that a library should be provided in every prison and, subject to the directions of the Secretary of State, every prisoner should be allowed to have library books and to exchange them. Is that the reality?



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Victoria Barnett: That is no longer the rule. They do not have to have a minimum of 20 minutes because it was impossible to implement. When you have thousands of prisoners and you say that everyone can go to the library, if everyone did want to, it would not be possible. But can we go back to what a library is in a prison? I have written down some notes so that I do not forget things. You are right, prison libraries are a statutory requirement. A prison library, like a public library, is not just a place that offers books; it is a community space that brings a diverse range of people together in a normal environment. That is really key because prisoners always tell us it is the one place where they feel they can be normal and have proper interactions. It is all about the pro-social modelling. Importantly, it is also a place to connect to families and encourage family literacy. We celebrate things like World Book Day in the prison and we encourage prisoners to engage with their children about reading through lots of programmes like Storybook Dads and Raising Readers, which I can tell you all about if you like. Family literacy, as well as prison literacy, helps to break the cycles of reoffending.

It is a place to envisage a positive future. Prisoners can come in, take part in competitions, learn something new and discover something they might like to take on as a future career because a lot of them realise that they will not be able to do what they used to do with a criminal record. They are looking for other opportunities. Often, it is about starting a business for themselves, and they can get that information in the library.

It is also a place for vital legal research and information from reliable sources provided by trained librarians. Librarians were rated as trusted by 93% of the population in a 2021 Ipsos MORI poll, and libraries are seen as safe places that people can trust. It is a place for health information and improving health outcomes and health literacy. It is not just the space; it is a combination of the space and the staff that brings something special.

We find that because of the contracting issues some libraries are being taken over by people who do not know how to run them and rely on donations. Books should be bought by professional staff who understand their customers, understand special needs and what people want to read, and then buy books that are appropriate for those people. Although you have a lot of people who cannot read and who might come and learn to read, you have a large number of people who can read very well and will go completely mad without good access to good quality stock just to pass the time and enjoy a bit of escapism.

Where contracts go to different providers, some of them education providers, you lose that connection with the outside library, which is a really important community space for reintegration back into society. At the moment, we have a project with the British Library to engage with probation services so that there is a more formal path out of the prison library for somebody who has never been in a library in their life, but who



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has discovered the joys of reading and all the things that a library can offer them. We want them to continue that journey on the outside.

- Q167 **Linsey Farnsworth:** That is really interesting, thank you. You mentioned having somebody who is specialised. Who provides the staff for the library? Is that a prison role?

Victoria Barnett: No.

- Q168 **Linsey Farnsworth:** Is it an educator role?

Victoria Barnett: In most prisons, the library is provided by the local authority. They are paid for and provided by the local authority. Staff have the training that local authority librarians have. They have access to the stock in the local library. There are all those benefits that come from having those trained staff. But if you lose that, you just have a room full of books that are not necessarily appropriate stock and somebody who is serving a 20-year sentence will be bored within six months.

- Q169 **Linsey Farnsworth:** That leads nicely to a question that was on my mind. In terms of initial assessments, Annick said earlier that 62% had a literacy need of level 2, and our stats say 65% of those assessed had reading levels of 1 to 3, essentially primary school-aged reading levels. You talked about the lady who was reading children's books initially. What sort of stock is there? Not everyone will want to read children's books.

Victoria Barnett: No, they will not. We want to encourage people to come into the library; that is the first step. Once they are in, we can engage with them and find them something to read. For non-readers, there are graphic novels, and they can learn the basics of following a story and build up from there. We have lots of books for different reading levels, so you can start very basic and move up.

Although it might seem a bit patronising to have children's books, we have them because a lot of prisoners can read to their children over the phone. So prisoners who cannot read can borrow those books and pretend they are going to read to somebody over the phone and actually use them to learn to read on the quiet. Not everybody wants to engage with the Shannon Trust because if you are seen with one of their mentors, it means, "I can't read, and everyone knows now that I can't read." There are ways of people sidling into the library and finding something to help themselves. Self-learning is really important and can lead to a more formal education, but stepping into a classroom is too much for some people.

- Q170 **Linsey Farnsworth:** Throughout this session we have heard evidence from you to support the idea that libraries will help prisoners in terms of their rehabilitation, but you recently wrote to members of this Committee with your concerns about the risk to libraries in prisons. Why are they currently at risk, and what needs to change to make sure that they are not at risk going forward?



Victoria Barnett: I have mentioned the contracting issues. The current contract has made it impossible for some local authorities to continue to provide library services because they cannot provide them at a loss. The library outside cannot support the library inside. That is a really difficult one because we are losing local authorities who provide a really good library service in the prison. Then somebody steps into that void who does not know how to run a library and just thinks that it is books, especially education providers where it becomes like a school library. Actually, that distinction between education and library is really important in a prison. We do not want to be an add-on to education; it needs to be seen as a separate department. We have our own managers and our own way of running, and we are not part of education. We are often lumped in with education, which is not very helpful for some prisoners who would engage with the library but do not want to engage with education.

Q171 **Linsey Farnsworth:** Thank you for making that point because I was definitely putting libraries in with education. You have clearly set out the difference between the staff in the library and the sorts of staff that Dr Jo has talked about who have their own challenges.

Victoria Barnett: In some discussions I have had, there has been a bit of a misunderstanding where people have said, "Well, librarians can teach people to read." They cannot; that is not their skillset. Teachers should be doing that. Librarians can help people find something appropriate to read and support them on that journey, but they do not actually teach people to read. I speak for Kent here because I cannot speak for every prison library in the country, but we have sessions where people with very low literacy can come in and do word games and puzzles with the staff, and the staff are brilliant at engaging them. You do not need to be able to read in order to do Storybook Dads.

We get a lot of feedback from prisoners who love telling us about what they get from our service. One of the most amazing was this man who could not read, but our staff persuaded him that he could do Storybook Dads anyway for his two young children. They tell him what the line says and then he does it, and then it is recorded and edited and beautifully done. When he left the prison, he asked his mother to write a card to the staff to thank them and said he was so overwhelmed by how his children had enjoyed this story that he had now decided to learn to read because he wanted to be able to read them a story himself properly.

Linsey Farnsworth: That is wonderful. Thank you, Victoria.

Q172 **Pam Cox:** Can I ask a practical question? To your knowledge, how many prisons have Storybook Dads?

Victoria Barnett: I will have to get back to you on that one. It is something that we pay for. It is not free; it is a charity. I would like to say every single prison—probably most prisons have Storybook Dads.

Linsey Farnsworth: Thank you. I could talk to you for hours about



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libraries.

Victoria Barnett: I could talk for hours about libraries.

Linsey Farnsworth: I am very conscious that the Chair is glaring at me, so I will leave it there, if I may.

Chair: You have drawn attention to my slapdash chairing. We are nearly at the end, but can we have a final question from Sureena?

Q173 **Mrs Brackenridge:** As we come to an end, I have quite a poignant question. Can you share an example of best practice where education is working well to promote rehabilitation? I will start with Lee.

Lee Owston: This is from the prison estate in terms of best practice. I had the pleasure of visiting Kirklevington very recently and saw their approach and absolute engagement with local employers and understanding of what the local skills needs were so that there were opportunities for when prisoners were released. Indeed, they were able to day-release to go and do some of that work, so there was already a relationship between them and employers for when they moved back into society. It is about working closely with local employers and being aware of what kind of vocational training prisoners may need.

In the example where I visited, they were training people to be baristas because there is a boom in coffee houses and the coffee industry. There was also a dual benefit in that they had set up their own coffee house at the edge of the prison where the community could come and have coffee and cake. Prisoners were getting the social skills of interacting and developing the skills they got through their vocational training programme. A large part of best practice is a really close relationship with local employers, so there are opportunities that prisoners are trained for when they come back to the community.

Dr Grady: If you want long-term, evidence-based, best practice examples of where rehabilitation is working, I am afraid to say I do not think you are going to find it in England. You need to look at countries where prison education is either publicly funded or structured very differently from here. I would point out Norway or places where there is not a fragmented privatised system that we have in England. I am afraid I do not have a positive example of something long-term and evidence-based for you.

Q174 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Is there nothing from your members?

Dr Grady: We have experiences of our members a bit like the one that I spoke about earlier where they are given space within the prison to do things like horticulture with proper space outside, and the prison is staffed properly so that students do not miss out on classes because of, for example, the urination issue that I talked about earlier. But we do not see that happening consistently here. I am not saying there are no pockets where these things do and can happen, but we see the



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horticultural garden getting bulldozed and turned into a car park, the chronic understaffing that the POA has talked about at length, and the degradation of employment conditions meaning that students pay the price.

We have a highly complex, not fit for purpose, fragmented, privatised system, which means the contract with prison educators squeezes value out of them, quite literally sometimes out of their pension, and does not support them to be able to teach students properly. We should take inspiration, and I hope this Committee does, from where it is done differently elsewhere, so that we have a national prison contract in England and move towards a national Prison Education Service where we set expectations and do not just leave it to private providers to maybe do those things, or for it to be delivered in ways that are not monitored. As I said, non-attendance is not routinely monitored.

We have had two reviews in the last 10 years: the Coates review and another one in 2022. They talked at length about, "Poor pay, lack of career development, unsafe working environments and no time or respect to do a quality job has left the recruitment and retention of qualified and experienced prison educators at crisis point." That was 2022. Nothing has changed. If anything, it has got worse. I am not suggesting we should not find pockets of best practice, but they are pockets, and they have managed to manifest despite a system structured to almost guarantee they never happen. Our prison educators deserve so much better because they perform miracles on a daily basis with people written off by the rest of society, and our prison population definitely deserves better.

Victoria Barnett: I am in the unique position of being able to offer lots of examples of best practice because prison libraries have a much easier approach than education. It is not as formal as education. I did want to give one example from Kent. All prison libraries, as far as I know, or almost all, have prison library orderlies. Those are prisoners who are working in the library as library assistants, and they do the same job as a library assistant in the outside world. In Kent, we decided to try to get the library assistant in our open women's prison a job in the local library, and it was fantastic. There were a few issues that we were worried about such as staff in the local library finding out she was a prisoner. We said, "You can say that you are a prisoner, or you can say that you are not." She chose to tell them that she worked at East Sutton Park and that she was just working there as well, and she was great. Now we will roll that out more extensively. We are currently recruiting the next position. From her point of view, it gave her back her confidence. She felt like she could re-enter the workforce. It was a nice, easy step from being a prison library orderly to working in the public library.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Apologies to the panel for starting and finishing late. Thank you very much for staying for the afternoon. It has been incredibly useful for us. We are going to end the session there.