

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Prison Education](#), HC 86

Tuesday 21 September 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns.

Questions 167 - 319

Witnesses

I: Matthew Coffey, Chief Operating Officer; and Paul Joyce, Deputy Director for Further Education and Skills, Ofsted.

II: Peter Cox, Managing Director, Novus; Sally Alexander, Principal, Milton Keynes College; Andrea Greer, Deputy Principal, Weston College; and Sophie Sterling, Business Development and Partnerships Director, PeoplePlus.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matthew Coffey and Paul Joyce.

Q167 **Chair:** Good morning and thank you very much for coming today. It is very good to have you. Just for the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, could you kindly introduce yourselves and give your titles, please?

Matthew Coffey: My name is Matthew Coffey. I am Ofsted's Deputy Chief Inspector and Chief Operating Officer.

Paul Joyce: My name is Paul Joyce and I am Ofsted's Deputy Director for Further Education and Skills.

Q168 **Chair:** Thank you. I want to begin by thanking you for your work in this area, because it has been incredibly important. Your recent annual report for 2019-20 suggested that nearly two thirds of inspections show poor management of the quality of education and skills and work in the custodial estate. Only nine of the 32 institutions inspected were judged to be good or outstanding compared to eight out of 10 providers of further education in the community. You also say that it is very common to find that prisons have not addressed the recommendations from the last inspection.

Why is prison education in such an appalling state? I note that you have recently announced your own inquiry, but what are the reasons for this? Is it the fault of the prisons; is it the fault of contractors; is it resources; is it the Government not putting enough priority into it? What is your view? Please, no holds barred.

Matthew Coffey: First of all, Chair, thank you very much indeed for inviting us to give evidence on this very important issue. You are right to identify that our annual report reflects the very poor state of prison education. Sadly, if you look at our annual reports going back over the last 10 years, you will see very similar outcomes. There is a frustration that things haven't moved forward.

The simple answer is that education in prisons is not given the priority that it deserves nor the recognition of the contribution that it makes to prevent prisoners from reoffending. You have asked whose fault it is. Prison education from a provider is just one cog in a very complex machine and education happens in different parts of the prison.

One of the failings is that those cogs are never aligned or seldom are they aligned. Where we have seen very good practice, it comes from the leadership at the top of the prison, where the governing governor recognises that every opportunity for a prisoner to learn a new skill, wherever that is in the prison, should be—

Q169 **Chair:** The answer you have given is a very diplomatic one. What I am trying to do is find out who is responsible for this. The work you have done is exceptional in terms of prison inspections, but who is at fault? Millions of



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pounds are going to contractors—£100 million or whatever. Why is this happening?

Matthew Coffey: If prison governors take their lead from their employer, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, I guess it is HMPPS we would be looking at to see a very clear strategy being set for the position and role of education within its prisons.

Q170 **Chair:** Do the providers share any responsibility for this—the reason for the poor quality of education?

Matthew Coffey: I have not seen the detail of the contract or the contracting process that goes on, but I would expect that the prison service would be looking to make sure quality was very high on the agenda, but the king of the castle is the governing governor, who can ensure that the prison education that is contracted works neatly with other parts of the prison estate.

Q171 **Chair:** I get that, but if you go to inspect a school that is failing, you point to the reasons why. You would say, "This school is failing in a certain way." What I am trying to understand is if you believe that the providers are not delivering.

Matthew Coffey: I am not afraid of saying what I think about prison education. It is in a parlous state. I don't think it is as simple as the education provider. I have seen fantastic premises and brilliant teachers with no prisoners. Why? Because the prison has not prioritised getting an escort to take prisoners to benefit from the education. Who is at fault there? I bring it back to the governing governors.

Q172 **Chair:** No, I get all that, but Ofsted would also not just inspect the governing of the prison; they would inspect the quality of provision, surely.

Matthew Coffey: Indeed.

Q173 **Chair:** What is your view about the providers?

Matthew Coffey: We have been very clear in our inspection reports that where we have seen very poor-quality education delivered because there has been a lack of a consistency of highly qualified teachers. We are seeing an awful lot of temporary teaching staff or people not turning up—

Chair: In your view, which providers have failed?

Matthew Coffey: I would need to write to you separately to go through the inspection reports.

Q174 **Chair:** Okay, but is it your view that in prisons some of the providers are not providing a good service?

Matthew Coffey: It must be a conclusion, given that only 40% of prison education providers are coming out with a good or an outstanding.

Q175 **Chair:** Given there are only four providers, you must have an idea of which providers you are talking about.



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Matthew Coffey: Their contracts are new. I am happy to write to you separately to do some further analysis, but we are inspecting the prison. The prison chooses to contract its education provision to one provider, and in the new arrangements the governing governor is able to buy in additional—

Chair: I could understand if there were 200 providers, but there are four providers, so you must have some idea. I just feel that you don't want to tell us publicly which providers you feel are not delivering.

Matthew Coffey: No. I will happily write to you separately, but we are very clear that we are inspecting the prison. Where we see failings, we look to the prison, because the prison has the contractual arrangements. The prison has the ability to fine its contractor for what its failings are.

Q176 **Chair:** Could you just reiterate the 40% figure? You said 40% of providers.

Matthew Coffey: 40% of prisons are good or better, therefore 60% are not.

Q177 **Chair:** In those 60%, it is some providers providing a brilliant education and some not? What is your view?

Matthew Coffey: I don't have that evidence. I will happily write to you, Chair.

Q178 **Chair:** Just one final question before I pass over to my colleague. Is it okay to use first names, by the way?

Paul Joyce: Of course.

Matthew Coffey: Yes, sure.

Q179 **Chair:** Thank you, Paul. In your written evidence, you suggest that education and skills are not given sufficient priority. What needs to be changed? Why is this happening?

Paul Joyce: Chair, that goes back to the point Matthew has just made about the priority given to education within prisons, the strategy for education and the role of education within an establishment. If that strategy isn't clear and if that prioritisation is not in place, that is where we see the failings within education within the prison.

Q180 **Chair:** Why is it not happening?

Paul Joyce: It often is because of a lack of a clear strategy or the priority given by leaders and managers within the establishments and the role that education plays, the importance of education within that establishment.

Q181 **Chair:** Do you have any views about the four providers?

Paul Joyce: As you rightly state, the four providers have a number of different contracts throughout the prisons. Within individual prisons—as Matthew says, it is the prison we inspect—we see the same providers in



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different prisons where the quality of education within those prisons does vary. It comes back to leadership and management of the prison.

Q182 **Chair:** Which providers, in your view, are doing this well?

Paul Joyce: Again, to use Matthew's analogy, the education provider may be that small cog in a much larger organisation. When those cogs—

Q183 **Chair:** It is not a small cog, because they are getting over £100 million. I just find it incredible—I am on your side here and I did say that to you outside—that you will not mention any providers here. Is it because they are watching or are you just shy publicly?

Paul Joyce: No. Chair, not at all.

Q184 **Chair:** There are four providers. You would know which academies are good and which school academies are not so good. You must have an idea. If you know about hundreds of academies around the country—hundreds of schools—you must know which providers you recommend and which are not delivering.

Paul Joyce: We do see a range of outcomes for all of the four providers in all of the individual prisons that we inspect. The four providers will have been graded "good" and some will have been graded "requires improvement" in different prisons.

Q185 **Chair:** Which ones have been graded "requires improvement"?

Paul Joyce: I would need to—again, as Matthew said—conduct some analysis, but I am happy to do that and write to you, Chair.

Q186 **Chair:** It is only four providers we are talking about. You should have come to the Committee knowing this, to be fair. I am not asking an unreasonable question. It is ridiculous.

Matthew Coffey: With respect, Chair, it is the prison we are inspecting. Within prisons, they contract out so many of their different activities. We are looking at prison education, and as I—

Q187 **Chair:** Yes, but the providers provide the prison education.

Matthew Coffey: They provide part of the prison education.

Q188 **Chair:** Yes, so you would have to assess them, surely, and you have done.

Matthew Coffey: Of course we do and we—

Q189 **Chair:** Yes, so you should be willing to say publicly which providers are doing a good job and which need improvement, but you seem unwilling to say that.

Matthew Coffey: We will provide the evidence for you.

Q190 **Dr Johnson:** Just a quick question. Essentially, what you are saying is that the providers may be providing good education, but the governors of different prisons are not enabling their prisoners to access the education



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that is provided. Are you saying the problem is the prison, not the education providers?

Matthew Coffey: I am saying that that is a scenario that could be absolutely correct.

Q191 **Dr Johnson:** In your inspections, which have you assessed as the bigger problem: poor provision of education; or good education provision that is not being accessed due to prison problems? Which is the biggest share of the difficulty?

Matthew Coffey: It depends on the different size, style and make-up of a prison. A high security estate will often prioritise security over anything, so you can often find in those establishments that prisoners don't get prompt enough access to education. In other parts of the estate, particularly with the local prisons, it may well be that the quality of provision is poor, and we write very clearly about what it is that we find on every inspection.

Q192 **Dr Johnson:** But as a whole across the prison estate, is the bigger problem poor education provision by the four providers, or one of them, in different estates, or is the bigger problem that the governors are not managing the prisons to ensure that the prisoners can attend education?

Matthew Coffey: The bigger problem is the leadership and management of the individual institution.

Q193 **Chair:** Is there a case where you have found the leadership and management of a prison good, but the provision wrong or not as good as it should be?

Matthew Coffey: I am sure that is the case. I cannot think of a particular example, because we have found two outstanding prisons over the past five years and a good number that are good. Where they are good, those things align.

Q194 **Chair:** Surely you would have published reports saying, "X prison: the management of the prison is good and they care about education and they are doing what they can, but the provision of the providers is not".

Matthew Coffey: That may well be the case. Where it is, what we would have identified is that the leadership and management are taking steps to improve the education.

Q195 **Chair:** Give me an example of that.

Matthew Coffey: I cannot give you the example without looking at the individual reports.

Q196 **Tom Hunt:** Without a clear idea of how good these different providers are, it does seem that it is very hard to get to the heart of the problem about why there is this issue with so few prisons being rated good or outstanding. Why is it that there are only four providers? Is there a chance that we can increase the number of providers?



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Matthew Coffey: That is a question for the prison service in terms of how it approaches its contracting. When it went to re-contract from the OLASS arrangements, it is fair to say that a lot of people—including ourselves—were quite surprised that very little seems to have changed. As I said to the Chair in answer to an earlier question, I have not been privy to what its procurement arrangements were, what it sought to achieve, but what it would have known at the point that it went to procure was that the current arrangements were not delivering, because we have been saying for the last 10 years it is not good enough.

Q197 **Tom Hunt:** It seems to me there is not a huge amount of choice for prisons and prison governors. They only have four different providers to choose from is my interpretation of it. Perhaps that is a slightly limiting factor on them.

Matthew Coffey: I would suggest that the prison service might be a bit more ambitious and look at other education providers, because what we are talking about here for a great majority of prisoners is that they need to learn how to read and write, and access ICT. There are an awful lot of schools and multi-academy trusts and further education colleges around the country. I don't know why they focus on four.

Q198 **Tom Hunt:** It just seems quite unusual that, when it comes to assessing schools in any other education sphere, the people being primarily assessed are those carrying out and delivering the education in person, whereas here that doesn't seem to be the case so much. It just seems quite unusual.

Matthew Coffey: I am not sure it is. We inspect a further education college for all that it is responsible for, and if that further education college chooses to contract out to a number of people, it is the college that we hold to account because it is responsible for leadership and management, and the management of that contract. For example, I know that prison governors have the ability to fine their current contractors up to 10% of the cost of the contract. Perhaps a good question to ask the prison service would be, "Has any prison governor exercised that right to fine them?" I am not aware, but I am not privy to that commercial information.

Q199 **Apsana Begum:** You have made a lot of comments about governors and individual governors of individual institutions. First, the new commissioning arrangements under the PEF, do you think they have given a lot of control and flexibility to prison governors to shape their education provision in line with the local requirements and to what degree?

Matthew Coffey: I think that that was the intention. I am not sure it has played out in reality. These arrangements are relatively new and of course the pandemic has meant that a full assessment has not been concluded, but my understanding is that about 15% of their entire budget is within the gift of the governing governor. That is a start, but I—

Q200 **Apsana Begum:** Do you think they are not exercising their control and flexibility; they are not using their right to exercise?



Matthew Coffey: I think some of them are attempting to do it. Prison governors have reported to us that they are finding it very difficult to navigate their way around the local procurement arrangements. Also, I understand that they have to use that 15% of the money to buy their information, advice and guidance, which in my view and in Ofsted's view is a real core offer that should be part of what every prison gets. If prison governors have to spend their devolved budget to get information, advice and guidance, it doesn't leave them a lot of headroom to be able to tailor provision to the needs of their prisoners.

Q201 **Apsana Begum:** You mentioned before about some individual institutions may be prioritising security over education, and it being different in different institutions. What other specific leadership challenges are there for prison governors, for senior management and staff in terms of managing and delivering the new education contracts?

Matthew Coffey: It goes back to the strategic view of what education is there for and what it can do to support prisoners. Heads of learning and skills are perhaps the people in a prison who might be able to support the governing governor by sitting around the leadership table and helping to oil these different cogs, but in many prisons they don't even get a seat at that leadership table. It is an enormous challenge for the—

Q202 **Apsana Begum:** Why not?

Matthew Coffey: That is a question for the prison service. I understand there was regrading of jobs. I think the original intention was that they were senior leadership roles, but over time they are much less senior and, therefore, they don't have a role around that table.

Q203 **Apsana Begum:** You may be aware of one of the recent reports by the University and College Union jointly with the Prisoner Learning Alliance. Last month a report was released based on surveys they have done with members. There was a lot concluded in terms of the quality of the relationships between prison governors, staff, senior management and a lot of recommendations around involving staff a lot more. Do you have any comments on that? Are there gaps in terms of governing, and senior management and staff who are delivering these programmes?

Matthew Coffey: Yes, I think there are. I do think it comes back to where the head of learning and skills sits. Running a prison must be a very complex job with competing priorities. Up until now, education really wasn't one of those priorities. Where we see excellent relationships between the head of education—whether that is a contractor or whatever—the head of learning and skills, and the head of works and industries, they all sit around a table, speak the same language and look for every single opportunity to support a learner on their journey to release and employment.

Chair: Can I very gently and politely ask you to be as concise as you can? I know there is loads to say. Thank you.

Q204 **Apsana Begum:** I have two more questions. It is quite difficult for us to



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get a sense of anything about the providers from yourselves. I know you are going to write separately. You have alluded to a lot earlier and now, but it is just very difficult for us to be able to get a sense of providers and where some of those blocks are and, indeed, understanding how you hold institutions and these services to account.

One final question: you mentioned the smaller bespoke services that can be brought in with the dynamic purchasing system. Can you give any examples of where it has been used successfully by governors to commission?

Matthew Coffey: I don't know if Paul has any more detail, but I know they are buying such things as construction certificates that are helping prisoners to get a job on release if there is a particular skills shortage and quite a lot of work with the rail industry as well.

Paul Joyce: They are good examples, Matthew. They are probably the two areas where governors are spending their budget on those, where that has been most successful. I must say, it is individual institutions and it is isolated as opposed to across the service.

Q205 **Apsana Begum:** One final question. The same four providers secured the main contracts in 2019, with the option to extend potentially in 2023. Should the contracts come to an end? Should they be extended? What is your view?

Matthew Coffey: That is a matter for those who will make the decisions about procurement and contract management. I hope that those that are responsible for contract management will read our inspection reports and understand the role that the individual provider might have played in that failing, if it is a failing that we have written about.

Q206 **Chair:** Can I just ask you to list the four providers?

Paul Joyce: Yes. PeoplePlus and Novus are two of the providers. Chair, forgive me, I will have them here. I will return to it, Chair.

Chair: I am genuinely amazed that you don't know the names of the providers—because it is so central to the work that you do—and that you have come here not willing to speak about them. It is not good enough. It is very poor. There are only four providers. If it was 100 schools, I could understand it. I am going bring in Caroline and then Ian.

Q207 **Dr Johnson:** A quick question. You said there has been 10 years of bad reports on prison education and, according to our brief, you have been in this job for about seven years. If you are saying the prison leadership is not ensuring that the education provided is good or is not ensuring that prisoners are able to access the good education that is provided, who has the authority to do something about it? Who receives your reports and who has been ignoring them for 10 years, or who has decided that education isn't as important as whatever reason these people are not accessing education?



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Matthew Coffey: It would be the prison service. We publish our report, so it gets to see the reports in full. There are no consequence for failure in this respect at all. We have written about that in our annual report. We have given speeches about it. It is frustrating. In every other walk of Ofsted's life, there are consequences for a school, and in that case it would be the Department for Education that would take action. It is very clear on the action that it will take in response to a poor finding, but the prison service does not have the same arrangement at all.

Q208 **Dr Johnson:** In your seven years, have you seen any example of a governor or the leadership of a prison held to account for a poor report on education and improvements as a result?

Matthew Coffey: I have been in Ofsted since 2007, so I will extend that a little bit further, and the answer is no, I haven't.

Q209 **Chair:** Do you know if any providers have been fined by the prison governors for poor provision?

Matthew Coffey: I don't know that. I believe that whenever we have asked to see that information, we are told it is commercial in confidence.

Q210 **Chair:** By who?

Matthew Coffey: The prison service.

Chair: Ofsted cannot even find out whether or not a provider has been fined?

Matthew Coffey: No. We can ask on inspection. I am not aware that they have.

Chair: You are not allowed to force a reply?

Matthew Coffey: No.

Q211 **Chair:** The rules say that the prison authorities can withhold information from you as to whether or not they fine providers. Is that 100% correct?

Matthew Coffey: That is perhaps stretching it a little. We have asked the question and we have been told it is commercial in confidence.

Q212 **Chair:** Do you go back to them? If you went and demanded it, would they give you the information?

Matthew Coffey: The area that we would want to go and demand it would be rather more than just a generic question. It would be on a specific inspection of an individual prison. I am not aware that any provider has been fined recently, since the new arrangements were put in place.

Q213 **Ian Mearns:** Therefore, could Ofsted think laterally about trying to pursue this? If a report on a prison comes up and it isn't very good, would you think about sharing that with the Justice Committee of the House of Commons, for instance, so that the Justice Committee could have a look at that and look at the evidence that Ofsted has provided? That is just a



thought.

Following on from the previous questions, have you any evidence from your inspections about how money provided for education and training for prisoners is spent, or if it is spent on education and training at all? Is it hypothecated, for instance?

Matthew Coffey: First of all, I think the suggestion is a good one. We will explore that further. Just to finish off on the following up, when we find that things are not as they should be, and we grade accordingly, we have now introduced a system where we go back on our own rather than jointly with Her Majesty's inspector of prisons to identify if progress has been made, so we will have even greater evidence to share.

In terms of where the money is spent, we understand what the budget is, generally measured in the number of hours that are provided, and we are able to work jointly with the chief inspector of prisons, who deals with budget, but we do it together to identify that the money is being appropriately spent where it should be.

Q214 **Tom Hunt:** My understanding is about a third of prisoners have some form of learning disability. Do you know if that includes the full spectrum, like dyslexia and dyspraxia? Does it include everything, that number?

Matthew Coffey: Part of the challenge is that we do not really know, because the research is thin on the ground. What we know is that the prison service is not very good at systematically identifying the specific needs of each of its prisoners. What it generally does is it issues an initial assessment to look at basic skills, but it relies far too heavily on what prisoners tell prison officers about their individual challenges.

Q215 **Tom Hunt:** My understanding is that in 2019 it introduced screening. That seems to me to be a slight improvement from the situation before. Does the quality of that screening vary from prison to prison?

Matthew Coffey: Yes, it does. What we see is that that can be administered by one prison officer with a very large number of new intake prisoners, or it can be done properly in the appropriate setting with somebody that is skilled and qualified. We call that out, for sure.

Q216 **Tom Hunt:** I would like to understand more about what it means by screening. What does it really mean and how does screening differ from a learning needs assessment? How is screening more intensive?

Paul Joyce: That goes back to your quality point. Where it is done very well, there are different processes in place. The staff that are undertaking that are qualified and experienced in those areas, so they know what they are looking for, and they are using the appropriate tasks and the appropriate initial assessment activity. Where it is not done as well, those two things may well be conflated. They may well be done by people that haven't the experience or expertise to do so.

Q217 **Tom Hunt:** In previous sessions when we have discussed screening, I



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think we have come to understand that this is not that intensive. It is not making sure that, when they come into prison, every person meets an education psychologist and gets properly diagnosed. Do you think it would be helpful for there to be an explicit requirement that that happens for every single prisoner who goes into the service?

Paul Joyce: You are absolutely right in what you have described as the situation. We find significant variability, so, yes, the quality of that does need to improve, absolutely.

Q218 **Tom Hunt:** It is pretty shocking that a third of all prisoners have a learning disability. It connects in with early years and other parts of the system. It seems that we are a bit blind at the moment. We think it is a third of all prisoners, but we don't know. If there was this explicit requirement, we could get far closer to the accurate number, because if it is 50%, that is a lot different to 33%, and—

Matthew Coffey: Sorry to interrupt. If we knew that, those that fund education in prisons would have a greater chance at funding what is needed. At the moment they don't, and there is just not enough attention paid to SEND for prisoners.

Q219 **Tom Hunt:** If we do figure out that a particular inmate has a learning disability, what is your assessment of the quality of the SEND provision provided at that point? Do you think it is good or bad, or that it could improve or varies?

Matthew Coffey: We have seen examples of some tremendous success stories where all those things that you and I would want to see have happened. They are the exception. In far too many cases we will go into a lesson and see so many people who are totally disengaged, unable to access whatever is being provided to them, and we will route that back to—

Q220 **Tom Hunt:** It seems to me that we need to know the true figure. There are some of us who want more funding to go into special needs right from the early years. It would equip us better if the scale of the crisis was even greater than a third.

Matthew Coffey: I agree with you.

Q221 **Ian Mearns:** Taking into account the significant differences for prisoners, such as the length of sentence and the different types of prisons that they are in, what would an ideal curriculum for the prison population look like?

Paul Joyce: I think the answer there is really articulated in your question. An ideal curriculum will meet the needs of the individual prison and the individual prison population. For example, we would expect a training prison to have a different curriculum offer and different needs to a prison that houses long-term offenders. We would also see the curriculum being tailored to the needs of the prisoners—going back to the previous question—based on a full understanding of what the educational needs are and what the resettlement needs of those prisoners are on release. An ideal



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curriculum is a tailored one that meets the categorisation of the prison and the needs of the prisoners within the institution.

Q222 Ian Mearns: Overall at the moment, from your inspections and your assessment, is there any real measure by which you can determine about how the education curriculum that is currently provided is conducive to rehabilitation of offenders?

Paul Joyce: It is always limited to an extent because of the amount of education that is provided within a prison to the prisoners in the establishment. Not every prisoner will undertake education activities while in the prison. It varies from prison to prison, and from curriculum offer to curriculum offer. Ultimately it goes back to the leadership and management of the prison, strategic intent and good planning.

Q223 Ian Mearns: You have talked about the individual leadership. Is the individual leadership the main challenge stopping the development of an ideal curriculum?

Paul Joyce: It is probably the most significant challenge. There is a number. To go back to the Chair's point earlier—I understand the Chair's frustration—the education provider within the prison is providing a small part of the activities in that establishment. We inspect and look at the education and work in the whole establishment, so the bit provided by the education provider, regardless of whoever that provider is, and how effective that is across the piece.

Q224 Ian Mearns: Is the curriculum provided appropriate to meet the different needs, for instance, for male prisons and female prisons?

Paul Joyce: For what I would call the core education offer, there will always be the need for literacy, numeracy and digital skills, whether it is a male or female estate. In our view, the difference in curriculum offer between a male and female estate should be a tailored offer that meets the needs of the prisoners and their resettlement aspirations.

Q225 Ian Mearns: Given what has happened in the wider world in the last 18 months, and the way in which schools and Government have started to provide much more widely information technology for students and for children across the whole piece, do you think there are any significant lessons that the Ministry of Justice and the prison service can learn from that in providing appropriate technology to prisoners that is secure and safe?

Paul Joyce: The simple answer is absolutely, yes, there are many lessons that could be learned. The digital infrastructure in prisons to enable learning and development is significantly behind the times.

Q226 Ian Mearns: To what extent are prisoners provided with an individualised development plan across the prison estate and what positives occur when this does happen?



Paul Joyce: Apologies for the same answer: it is variable. It depends from prison to prison, with leadership being the key driver. What is important is where it happens well, and where the individual plan is linked to sentence planning and moves through prison when prisoners move from establishment to establishment. That has a really positive impact and contributes significantly to reducing reoffending rates and to their rehabilitation.

Q227 **Ian Mearns:** We have heard evidence, unfortunately, of when that has not taken place—when prisoners have moved from establishment to establishment and basically start again.

Matthew Coffey: I am afraid that is a message of the last 10 years. Even with the onset of a digital solution to solve this problem, it does not happen systematically.

Q228 **Dr Johnson:** I have a quick question about children who move from the secure children's estate, grow up and then join the adult prison estate, which it seems is most of the children in forensic children's homes. I heard on my visit to one such establishment that a lot of these young people are training for qualifications at the point of moving into the adult estate, and they may turn 18 in the middle of the school year when they are moved. In your assessment, should they be moved during the school year if they turn 18? What do you do in your Ofsted inspections with marking them on their transition for young people into the adult estate for the first time?

Matthew Coffey: Should they be moved? We have said publicly in the past that the hard and fast rules can undermine a very decent education offer and it would be shocking if somebody was months away from qualifying or sitting an exam and was moved because somebody had said so. We have said, "You really need to think about the individual. You need to prioritise the education and delay it if that is going to be to the advantage of the individual." Do we look at that transition arrangement? We absolutely do and all too often we are finding those awful stories—that I suspect you have heard of—where stuff has been lost in transit and they have had to start again. It is frustrating.

Q229 **David Johnston:** What do you see as the current challenges to finding prisoners employment in prison and after their release?

Matthew Coffey: The relationship between the prisoner and the employer is always going to be a very difficult one. You have the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act that means things have to be declared for quite a long time in some cases. I am not suggesting that is wrong for one minute. There are areas where prisoners clearly don't need to be working in the future maybe with children or whatever it might be. Getting that relationship with the employers into prison early is where we have seen it being very successful. There needs to be more of that, more of getting local employers engaged with prisoners, working very effectively with them.

Q230 **David Johnston:** The obvious example that springs to mind on this is Timpson doing very good work here, but are there others or are we relying



largely on them?

Matthew Coffey: There are others. Timpson is the most commonly used but that is because there has been some real successes and Timpson himself has pushed through barriers and the frustration of the prison service and so on. There are others and I am hoping that these new hubs that have been created fairly recently, in the last few months, are going to set out to try to bring more Timpsons to the table.

Q231 **David Johnston:** To what extent do you think the establishment of the New Futures Network is going to help some of these challenges?

Matthew Coffey: We absolutely welcome it because it is a step in the right direction, but if it is going to be nothing more than a CV writing workshop it is going to fail. It needs to have employers meeting with prisoners, engaging with them and helping to support them into interviews beyond the prison gate and so on.

Q232 **David Johnston:** What role is the employment hub playing in helping offenders find jobs?

Matthew Coffey: Again, it is too early to say, but we have seen some of these employment hubs in operation in some of the good prisons. It is a gamechanger and it really helps to influence and inform the curriculum offer in a prison. The success of a prisoner soon gets around the prison estate and can generate and motivate others. We have seen it as very successful. You have to get the right employers and you have to keep at it.

Q233 **David Johnston:** Where do think is the best example at the moment?

Matthew Coffey: I saw several years ago a really good employment hub in—is it still called Isis next door to Belmarsh? It had a very good employer hub. I happened to be there inspecting when the employer hub was going on. There were 16 or 17 local employers, really energetic, really enthused and engaging with prisoners and they had an opportunity to show their skills. It was fantastic to see.

Paul Joyce: I echo that I think this is a move in the right direction. This is something that has huge potential to help with prisoners on release, rehabilitation, reducing the offending. It is too early for us to give any definitive, "This is working really well and here it isn't". The last 18 months has obviously caused further difficulties and put that behind, but we will certainly look at this very closely on inspections going forward.

Q234 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Paul and Matthew. You have painted a very bleak picture this morning, made more so by the fact that nothing has changed in the last 10 years. You have talked about the quality of education and the fact that there is a major disparity between teaching in prisons and comparisons within further education. From your point of view, what do prisons need to do to attract good-quality teachers and trainers into the prison service?



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Matthew Coffey: At the risk of repeating some of my earlier answers, the leadership and management of a prison has to be part of the solution. There must be nothing more demoralising as a teacher than having prepared a lesson to perhaps a very challenging class to find that nobody turns up. I have seen those empty classrooms. That must be really frustrating.

That has to be part of the solution because I don't think you would need many of those before you became disillusioned with teaching in prison. The happiest teachers are those who are engaged beyond their education unit and are engaged with prisoners throughout the prison. Fundamentally, let's make the job a bit more rewarding.

Q235 **Kim Johnson:** You are saying it is not about the quality of teachers. UCU and the Prisoner Learning Alliance have published a report recently and provided some recommendations about recruitment and retention of staff. You do all of that work but, as you pointed out, it is very much down to the leadership and how governors govern.

Matthew Coffey: How you are valued in a prison. I don't disagree with those findings about recruitment and retention. There is a challenge. There is a problem. It is not necessarily an attractive role for lots of reasons and it is not for everybody, so when you do get people in there they need the support, the development and so on. The providers themselves need to really get underneath what is the problem with average working days lost because there is an awful lot of interim, temporary, fill-in staff and that is not good for the prisoners on their education journey.

Q236 **Kim Johnson:** You have mentioned that over the last 10 years things have not improved but you still go in, you still do this work and the inspections. What needs to happen to make those changes significantly, particularly across Government?

Matthew Coffey: We need a really clear strategy and a really clear message from the prison service that education has a significant role to play. We need to measure its impact on reducing reoffending and we need to hold those to account properly when it fails.

Q237 **Tom Hunt:** I am sorry if this sounds a slightly silly question but, to make this really clear, when you are assessing the prisons and making a judgment on the prison, the governor and so on, is that what you are grading? You are not grading and assessing the providers.

Paul Joyce: We inspect with the prisons inspectorate. The idea of doing that is that we are then inspecting the whole prison. We contribute to their report. We look at education, skills and work, which includes the education provision that is delivered by the named provider, as well as any other provider that the governor procures services from, as well as activities delivered by the prison service and prison staff. It is quite a complex environment in who is actually delivering. It is not a single provider delivering.



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Q238 **Tom Hunt:** When you say, “X prison is good”, you mean that that prison is good at providing education services in that prison. Do you mean that the provider is good as well? I don’t quite understand.

Paul Joyce: You are absolutely right to clarify the point. When we are grading, we are grading education, skills and work within the prison. The education, skills and work within the prison is delivered by a number of different people and one of them is the education provider. It is unlikely that the provider will be good unless the prison is good.

Q239 **Tom Hunt:** It seems to me that there is a very big role here for the prison and governor in question to hold the provider to account and make sure it is providing a good level of education service.

Matthew Coffey: Absolutely, but it is also really important. There are many industries in a prison—everybody needs feeding; the place needs cleaning—and if the prison governor is not seeing that as an opportunity to educate and to accredit skills, that would be marked down. It is the whole education, work and training.

Q240 **Chair:** The provider is still an important part.

Matthew Coffey: Of course they are an important part.

Chair: You inspect the provider.

Matthew Coffey: We have access to the provider to judge the prison.

Q241 **Chair:** Yes, and you inspect the work of the provider in your assessment of what goes on in prisons.

Matthew Coffey: Yes.

Q242 **Chair:** You write about the provider in your reports.

Matthew Coffey: Yes.

Paul Joyce: Yes.

Q243 **Tom Hunt:** There could be an example of one prison being graded inadequate and another prison being graded good, and it could be the same provider operating in both?

Matthew Coffey: Absolutely right. That is a really important point.

Q244 **Chair:** That also may depend on the quality of the individual staff so, while the same provider might be bad in one area and good in another, it might be because the staff of that provider in one prison may be excellent and the staff in the other may not be as good for one reason for another. Is that fair?

Paul Joyce: Absolutely, Chair, and where it is that will be pointed out in the inspection reports.

Q245 **Chair:** Okay. When will your Ofsted inquiry finish and what is the timeframe?



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Paul Joyce: We are just undertaking it. Initially we are looking at undertaking a year review. This is really important. We are starting with reading, Chair, as I am sure you know. We will look at our findings from that and if this needs to be a longer inquiry, if we need to put more resource into it, we will do. It is very much a priority because of the inaction that we have seen, and we are starting to do that and we will look with interest.

Q246 **Chair:** The inaction from where—from Government; from prisons; from providers? From where?

Paul Joyce: Our job will be to report what we find.

Q247 **Chair:** You just said you are doing it because of the inaction you have seen. Where have you seen that inaction and from whom?

Paul Joyce: I see this inaction at all levels. As you rightly said, with our annual report and our individual institution reports, we find education providers, individual governors and the prison service not taking firm enough action.

Chair: You are saying that all are culpable; it is not just one part of it. Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

As I said at the beginning, I think that the work you do is good. I am just frustrated about you not knowing about the providers and I would be very grateful if you could write to us in detail. This is not about naming and shaming, but it is just to see what works and what does not, and the reasons why. That will be very helpful. Thank you for your work and your public service.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Peter Cox, Sally Alexander, Andrea Greer and Sophie Stirling.

Q248 **Chair:** We will start straightaway with our next session. Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for attending the earlier session from Ofsted. As I mentioned in the closing remarks, our job is to scrutinise the work that you do. I respect much of the work that you do, but we have to scrutinise as part of our inquiry. I hope you take the questions in that spirit. For the benefit of the tape and for those watching on Parliament TV and the internet, please introduce yourselves and give your titles.

Andrea Greer: Good morning. Andrea Greer, Deputy Principal of Weston College.

Chair: I will gently ask everybody to speak a bit louder so that people outside can hear.

Sally Alexander: Sally Alexander, Principal, Milton Keynes College.

Sophie Sterling: Sophie Sterling, Business Development and Partnerships Director for PeoplePlus.



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Peter Cox: Good morning. I am Peter Cox, Managing Director of Novus, part of LTE Group FE Corporation.

Q249 **Chair:** Thank you. Some of our questions will be directed at individuals, so we should reflect that in our questions. I will ask you to answer every question as concisely and in a nutshell as possible, because we have a lot to get through. I will start by asking generally if you could each tell me the value of the Government contract that you have with the prison service.

Andrea Greer: The value of it is approximately £10 million per year.

Sally Alexander: About £17 million.

Sophie Sterling: I know we operate in 22 prisons, but I am going to need to take that away to give you the exact value.

Peter Cox: There are various constituents. Under the PEF contract it is around £60 million. We work in three young people's estates of around £8 million through the youth custody service. In addition, we are working with HMPPS Wales and Novus Cambria with around £4 million a year and there are other smaller contracts. In total, Chair, it is about £80 million.

Q250 **Chair:** Thank you. Given what Ofsted has said about the quality of prison education— "Most prisoners are receiving a standard of education and skills training which is not good enough"—as four providers across the prison estate, how do you justify the large contracts that you receive when the outcome is of such poor standard?

Peter Cox: There is an overall challenge, as we have heard from Ofsted today, around leadership and management and the overall grading of quality across the whole prison. It has been an ongoing challenge and looking a bit further back pre-pandemic, in 2017, the overall effectiveness of prison education was about 24% good or better. However, at that time there was a provider grade that is no longer issued by Ofsted under the new inspection approach since 2019. With the provider grades, over 60% were good for the education provider. I hope you can see from that data that the challenge is around the wider prison and challenges with the regime.

Sophie Sterling: I echo Peter's sentiments there. The prison landscape is an incredibly challenging environment to deliver within and all of the constituent parts that comprise the overarching delivery model have found challenges, through Covid for example, that it has been exacerbated—

Chair: This has been going on for a long time. It is not just the past year, so we cannot use Covid as an excuse.

Sally Alexander: I won't repeat what others have said. I will reiterate that the staff base that we have in prisons is qualified and very experienced, but it is a challenging environment to work in. For me, some of the challenges that make it difficult to retain good staff in prisons are the regimes that we have to work with, the challenge with the IT infrastructure,



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which I know is a priority for HMPPS that we have not seen yet, and also the vocational infrastructure. I feel that we need a reasonable investment in the vocational infrastructure to be able to meet the current needs of employers.

Andrea Greer: I echo my colleagues' views, but I don't think that you have had the most current information today, certainly for 10 years of Ofsted inspections. Weston College has been involved in prison education for nine years and in 2016 we had an Ofsted "outstanding" at HMP Leyhill, so you are not necessarily hearing about that. Also, since the full Ofsted inspections ceased in March 2020 due to the pandemic, there has been a great deal of activity still, and we have used that time as providers as an opportunity.

There has been a series of Ofsted interim remote visits, short scrutiny visits and progress monitoring visits. From our point of view, the statistics are good. We have had a great deal of either good progress or rapid progress, so things are moving and changing in a much more positive direction very quickly.

Q251 **Chair:** Not according to Ofsted, and we heard from them today on the statistics they have given us.

Andrea Greer: As I say, there has been a lot of activity in recent years and months.

Q252 **Chair:** Has any of you been fined by the prison authorities?

Andrea Greer: You are not fined. That is not the word that we would use. There are certainly financial clawbacks, and there are processes in which money is held back.

Q253 **Chair:** However you want to describe it, have any of you had financial clawbacks because they have been unhappy about the service that has been provided?

Andrea Greer: It is a range of factors. It is not necessarily to do with unhappiness about things, but there are punitive measures in place, so providers are certainly accountable.

Q254 **Chair:** Have you had that from any prisons?

Andrea Greer: Yes. I would say it is quite normal for all of the providers to have that.

Q255 **Chair:** You all have. What are the general reasons?

Peter Cox: The general reasons are facts under the contracts related to the TQMP—the teacher quality management plan. Those are signed off at governor level every quarter. To give the Committee an idea about Novus's performance on this, we are currently getting about 95% signoff.

Q256 **Chair:** Sophie, have you had financial penalties, financial clawbacks or fines—whatever you want to call them?



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Sophie Sterling: Yes. As my colleagues have explained, it is a fairly complex set of KPIs that come together. Yes, I believe we have, but, as my colleagues pointed out, that has been the case across the piece.

Sally Alexander: Yes we have, but a very small number and it will be for reasons such as attendance, not being able to engage enough learners to come along, or potentially not having enough staff in place. It is for a variety of reasons.

Q257 **Chair:** How many times have you had these fines? Have they gone on every year or is it one year that you have had it? Is it every year?

Sally Alexander: The current contract has only been in place for two and a quarter years. I don't know about the other providers' experience, but from our experience we have had very few. I think we have had two.

Q258 **Chair:** Thank you. How many have you had?

Andrea Greer: We have a very good rate for TQMP signoffs. It is about 97%.

Q259 **Chair:** How many fines have you had, or whatever you want to call it?

Andrea Greer: They are not exactly fines. As Sally said, sometimes funding can be withheld and it could be a case of if you are trying to possibly re-recruit—

Chair: How many?

Andrea Greer: If you are trying to re-recruit a teacher, essentially—

Chair: How many financial clawbacks have you had over the past five years?

Andrea Greer: Well, the contract has not been going for five years as yet.

Chair: Okay. How many have you had since your contract?

Andrea Greer: It depends on financial reconciliation and that happens yearly.

Q260 **Chair:** Okay. How many, though? Sally has just told us. Why can you not tell us?

Andrea Greer: Certainly there is an element of clawback I would say for all providers every year, including Weston College.

Chair: How many have you had?

Andrea Greer: We have had one so far because they have not quite reconciled year 2.

Sophie Sterling: Again, very minimal.



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Peter Cox: As I stated previously, Chair, for the TQMP we have had over 95% success and the contract is reconciled annually. Year 1 has been concluded and we are mid process on year 2 of the contract at the moment.

Q261 **Chair:** Are these financial clawbacks made public and fed up to Her Majesty's prison service?

Sally Alexander: I would say everybody involved with our contract will be aware of them. The governor has to sign them off, so it comes from the governor and then our contract management team right up to commercial will be aware of them.

Q262 **Chair:** Have any of you had poor or unsatisfactory ratings from Ofsted? You mentioned a prison that you have done outstanding work in, and that is great, but have any of you had poor or unsatisfactory reports from Ofsted, or have they not been happy with you in certain prisons?

Peter Cox: During the current contracting period, so from April 2019 of the PEF contract, the provider does not get a grade as briefed by Ofsted.

Q263 **Chair:** Yes, but they will have given an opinion of your provision, as they pointed out earlier. Has any of you had poor opinions?

Peter Cox: They give a narrative, Chair. They don't give a grade related to the provider specifically.

Q264 **Chair:** Have any of them given an unsatisfactory narrative—clearly not happy?

Peter Cox: On exceptional occasions.

Q265 **Chair:** How many?

Peter Cox: I would have to come back to you, Chair.

Q266 **Chair:** How many prisons are you in?

Peter Cox: We work in 43 adult prisons.

Q267 **Chair:** How many of those prisons have Ofsted given a narrative—however you want to describe it—that clearly shows that improvement is required?

Peter Cox: I would have to come back with the exact number, but it is quite low, Chair.

Sophie Sterling: It is equally the same for us. We deliver in 22 prisons and I can come back with the exact number, but it is four or five.

Sally Alexander: If my memory serves me right, Chair, it is one prison and the narrative was very much about attendance in classrooms.

Andrea Greer: We operate in 19 prisons and we have just two currently for which further progress needs to be made, but again there were some very positive comments that came back in the narrative about ongoing progress.



Q268 **Chair:** We have had evidence about poor pay and working conditions that teachers in prisons receive. What are you doing to ensure that teachers get equivalent pay to those who work in schools and colleges? Why would they be paid less for very complex and difficult work?

Andrea Greer: In Weston College, prison education teachers are not paid less. They are on the same terms and conditions as existing Weston College staff at the main site. They also have an additional support service with dedicated HR professionals and staff welfare officers. They have the full suite of support services that any other teacher at the main site has.

Sally Alexander: Similarly, our terms and conditions are the same for the main college campus and in prisons. Every time a contract changes staff TUPE over, and that will be on a range of terms and conditions and we don't always automatically bring those all into line at the same time. It is a process that we work towards and we have a system in place where we can review people's pay annually.

Sophie Sterling: I echo the sentiments. Our teacher salaries and tutor salaries are competitive. Not to go over the same ground, another thing that we look at is our CPD offer and our teacher qualifications—the additional offer that we make on top of the contractual terms and conditions.

Peter Cox: I echo colleagues. We have an attractive offer, including a teachers' pension scheme, as across the mainstream, supported by a significant CPD programme. We are currently reviewing our terms and conditions to look at how we can improve attraction through a project review that is currently underway.

Q269 **Tom Hunt:** If we were just looking at this session so far and going off what you all said in the first 20 minutes, I think we would come to a conclusion that this is a sector where everybody is going quite well and prison education is in a really good state. In reality we know that the data we have been provided with indicates that there is a problem somewhere. There are not enough prisons being rated good or outstanding. What do you think is the reason for that, chiefly? You are all pretty confident and positive about what you are doing. Is the problem prisons? Is the problem individual prison governors? Is that the issue?

Sally Alexander: I reiterate a lot of the comments that our Ofsted colleagues made earlier. I will have worked in prisons for 30 years next year. I have worked in prisons from the ground floor up to a management level. It is the prisons with a senior prison team that values and understands the power of education to rehabilitate where you can have an impact. In all of the prisons where we have had really good outcomes, it is where you have that buy-in across the board.

I would not say it is a brilliant picture. It is a challenging picture, but it is not for want of trying on behalf of the providers. We will have individual instances where we may have provision that is not good and we will



address that in the same way as we would in the main FE college. There are a lot of challenges in prisons that are beyond our control that we don't have to deal with in the main college, and I don't have to deal with in Milton Keynes because I can manage that directly. There are challenges and we are doing our best within those challenges to get the best outcome for the learners we work with.

Sophie Sterling: We have seen an example recently of HMP Norwich where the governor has placed an absolute honed focus on education and has replicated that with prisoner pay. They are paid more to go into education than they are to undertake work on the wing. The narrative around that is very much, "Your education comes first. Yes, absolutely you can move on in the future into other work and into industries." To answer your question, yes, you do see pockets of best practice and perhaps not so much, but there is some very different and innovative thinking that governors put in place around it.

Q270 **Tom Hunt:** I am trying to understand practically what makes the difference between a first class prison and not. Financial incentives is one interesting example to get engaged in education. Are there any other examples you could use of a prison taking practical steps to engage?

Sophie Sterling: Yes. Another idea to share with the Committee is that our prison estate is very different. You have very different establishments, more modern open prisons, and historically you have the other end of the scale with old buildings. We should be looking at the space that we have available. Where we have space that can be turned into a college kind of environment, which is reflective of perhaps what community learning would look like, results and engagement among the learners tend to be better. I think there is a piece about estates, but that is almost dictated by the establishment itself.

Andrea Greer: The aim should always be that you are replicating the same opportunities on the outside for learners to have on the inside. Essentially, we have wider reforms under the new FE reforms, the Skills for Jobs White Paper. That is a wonderful opportunity where colleges are forging ahead. Colleges are particularly well placed with apprenticeships and their contacts with employers and so on to be able to bring that much more into the prisons. As you are probably aware, at the moment we are not able to offer apprenticeships to offenders because of a number of barriers to that. As it stands, you have to have an employment contract and it has to be a minimum of 30 hours.

Chair: We are going to come on to that in a bit. You know that is something I am very passionate about.

Q271 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I want to pick up on what you were saying about terms and conditions for your staff. You have mentioned that they are similar contracts but you also mentioned about CPD. Do your workers stay long enough to benefit from some of that support? Are your employees precarious with zero-hour contracts?



Chair: Could you all answer that in a nutshell, please?

Andrea Greer: We don't have staff on zero-hour contracts. In the main we have staff in substantive roles. Sometimes there is a need for agency workers, but the vetting process can take such a long time. The preferred basis is permanent staff on substantive contracts, and we have very low turnover rates.

Sally Alexander: We have what we call an occasional worker contract, which is purely a contract to cover where we don't have people in place when people leave, but our staff are on permanent contracts. They could be full-time or they could be part-time, but our contracts are permanent. We have occasional workers for when we have somebody going sick or somebody leaving.

Sophie Sterling: The short answer is, no, we don't use zero-hours contracts. To pick up a little bit, we have a commitment that we will educate all of our training staff to at least level 4-plus. That is a particular area of importance to us because we feel that there is an incredible talent pool sitting in prisons and to have teaching staff who are able and qualified to the level that they need to be able to progress learners is incredibly important.

Peter Cox: Our staff are employed on permanent contracts. We have mainly substantive roles but in addition we have cover contracts for leave, and cover periods for maternity or unforeseen sickness. We have a comprehensive CPD programme with a dedicated teacher education development team for our colleagues working in prisons.

Q272 **Dr Johnson:** This is a question for Sally. You said when you had been sanctioned that it was specifically for attendance at the course. Was it that you had put forward a course in which there was not sufficient interest, and therefore you didn't get paid for it; was it that you started a course and people signed up and started it, but it was not well delivered so they lost interest; or was it that the governors were not bringing in prisoners, or allowing them to attend the course for other reasons?

Sally Alexander: It can be all of those reasons.

Q273 **Dr Johnson:** You said you had only two sanctions, didn't you?

Sally Alexander: Yes. It could have been all of those. If you want the absolute detail I would have to go away and get that. I don't have that specifically. I wasn't expecting that question, so I don't have that specific detail to hand. When I mentioned attendance, that was where we had the more negative narrative from an Ofsted visit. That was simply not being able to get prisoners to classes where we had teachers with classes ready to go; it was because of a shortage of prison officers we could not get prisoners into our classrooms.

Q274 **Dr Johnson:** It was a prison problem and not your problem?



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Sally Alexander: It was, and not their fault. They had a shortage of prison officers. It would not have been for want of trying, but they literally did not have the capacity to get students to us.

Q275 **Dr Johnson:** You actually got fined for something that was not your fault?

Sally Alexander: That was the Ofsted commentary. You can also be fined if you did not have staff to deliver. That would be attendance due to not having a member of staff. For example, I could have a member of staff who delivers a very specialised subject go sick and we would make the decision that we cannot deliver. It could be, say, a carpentry course.

Q276 **Dr Johnson:** Sorry to interrupt you, because I know Robert wants to keep this short. Was the attendance problem your attendance or the prisoners' attendance?

Sally Alexander: It was the attendance of us not having a member of staff.

Q277 **Ian Mearns:** How many of you employ ex-offenders anywhere in your establishment?

Sophie Sterling: This is something that I am incredibly excited about because I can see there being a real synergy between offenders that we have in our custody who are qualified for teaching. We are definitely in conversation with prison governors about this and we are very close to making that happen in one of our prisons.

Q278 **Ian Mearns:** You have also admin roles outside of the prison estate. Do you have anybody who works for you who is a former offender? You have, Peter. You have, Andrea.

Sally Alexander: Yes, on the main college and we managed one example of an ex-prisoner running a radio programme course for us in one of our prisons previously, but it is that unusual that I can remember the individual.

Q279 **Ian Mearns:** It is not many?

Sally Alexander: No.

Sophie Sterling: There is an element around peer mentoring though. There is employment, I guess. To help a learner take a step towards employment by becoming a mentor for other learners in our service is an incredible and effective way of demonstrating progression modelling, and it really works for self-advocacy and increasing confidence levels. That is another aspect.

Q280 **Chair:** How many apprentices do you employ as organisations and companies?

Andrea Greer: We employ 150 across the college group.



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Sally Alexander: I would have to get you that figure, but it is a question we have to answer on every single piece of recruitment that we do, is this suitable—

Chair: Very roughly?

Sally Alexander: I would say about 100.

Sophie Sterling: I will have to go away and check and confirm the figure, but it would be 100-plus. It is an area of focus for us.

Peter Cox: Similar, Chair, over 100.

Chair: Well, at least you practise what you preach. We are going to come to apprentices later, so that is very good.

Q281 **Apsana Begum:** You all provide education to a large number of prisons across large regions. How do you respond to criticisms that the new system introduced in 2019 should have led to a more open, more varied system with more local FE colleges involved in providing educational services to their local prisons? That question is to everyone.

Sally Alexander: I am happy to take that question first. I think the four providers are here because they are experts in prison education. It is probably not surprising to see us involved in some degree or other, because we have a degree of expertise and understanding of the environment and the learner cohort. It was a very challenging tendering process and it would have come over as very risky to people who were not familiar with the world of prison education. If I was not familiar with it and was not able to justify to our board of governors that we had the confidence to make the contract work, it is not something, as an external person, that I would have recommended to our board.

It is a very risky contract financially. It is very punitive and it is quite a challenge to deliver, so I imagine if you came in as an external person and looked at it, it would not have been an attractive option. The only option left to the governors is the DPS, the dynamic purchasing system, that I know you are aware of, where they can bring in a range of providers, including local FE providers and specialists, to complement the provision that is already available.

Q282 **Apsana Begum:** Do you think the tendering process can be enhanced by involving individual governors more closely in processes?

Sally Alexander: I think they were involved in the first stage of the process but they were not involved in the final decision making, but I could not swear to that and that is a question you would need to ask the HNPPS colleagues.

Sophie Sterling: To add to that, there are the prison education providers but also, when a person is released from prison as a returning citizen and they go back into the community, there is definitely a role that the prisons and the education providers need to play in terms of plugging that ongoing



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support in with FE colleges within the community. There is a role for everybody to play.

Q283 **Apsana Begum:** Coming back to Sally, you have noted the current PEF contract is fairly bureaucratic and not flexible. Can you expand a little bit on that? Tell us what implications that has for delivering an educational programme overall.

Sally Alexander: For me, as somebody who is based in a main FE college and having worked in prison education for nearly 30 years, this contract is a very transactional contract. It does not feel like a contract where you look at delivering a service to meet individual needs. It is a bit like, "I would like a table by next Friday. Have you delivered the table? Yes, you have. I will pay you".

That is opposed to looking at the fact that learners are all individuals, prisons are all challenging establishments and sometimes what you might say you are going to deliver is not right for that regime or that prisoner. To try to change it, it is a very bureaucratic process that needs to be signed off at different levels and the senior colleagues in the commercial department can say we are not going to sign that off, even though you want to move at pace to do it.

Q284 **Apsana Begum:** What flexibilities would help?

Sally Alexander: For us to be able to adapt a curriculum to meet learner needs or circumstance at pace, which is what we would be able to do in the main FE sector.

Q285 **Apsana Begum:** Do you believe the prison education framework commissioning order itself is the correct order for providing education in prisons and for incentivising investment by you in capital investment, in staff and resources?

Peter Cox: There are a number of concerns. As colleagues have already mentioned on the panel, the complexity is the contracting framework is very commercial and transactional and does not support, does not have a focus on educational quality and development. Other inhibitors around that, in terms of the way it is transacted, whether it is purchasing food products or clothing for a prison, education is treated the same. There are not freedoms and flexibilities to drive forward change through quite a rigid contract process compared to the freedoms and flexibilities we see within adult FE provision across the organisation.

The challenge in terms of the contracting nature is quite a short-term cycle and we would welcome as organisations a longer-term commitment to make the capital investments required to drive forward the facilities. One area of concern the panel discussed before is meeting the learner need aligned with the skills employers want.

We are working with quite outdated conditions because there has been a lack of capital investment in prison education, which is a limiting factor on



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some of the areas of the curriculum that can be offered and, therefore, are not meeting the skill needs of employers or the individual needs of learners. That affects the quality of provision, so it is about having that ability to capital, and also whether the MoJ or the commissioning body sees and puts in place—as we have seen in the Skills for Jobs White Paper, initiatives and developments like FE capital development fund around T-levels and level 3 qualifications—that investment to upgrade the facilities to deliver a more aspirational curriculum.

Q286 Apsana Begum: In terms of capital investment, did you think that was exposed a lot more in the pandemic? Did it have an impact and was it exposed more in terms of the lack of capital investment?

Peter Cox: There has been years if not decades of underinvestment in capital facilities in prisons, and those are limiting factors, and the facilities provided by the prison service for us to operate in can be a restricting factor around the offer.

Q287 Apsana Begum: Novus as a provider stands out from the rest because your staff went on strike twice this year.

Peter Cox: Yes, they have, and that was related to ongoing issues with UCU and concerns around appropriate safety. That action has now been paused by UCU, and we are in discussions through ACAS to work to a conclusion—that is in process at the moment.

Q288 Apsana Begum: That brings me to my final question to Sally and Andrea. Witnesses have commented that providers are using lucrative prison contracts as a means of investing back into their FE colleges as opposed to delivering meaningful education to reduce reoffending. How do you respond to that?

Andrea Greer: I can say categorically that that is absolutely not the case. As you have heard, these contracts are not for the fainthearted in terms of the financial repercussions, and also, given the fact that the financial reconciliation process can take up to a year and a quarter, it can be very difficult for colleges when they are trying to close off their accounts and dealing with auditors as well, so that is a significant part of it.

From our point of view, it is the fact that the framework does not allow that flexibility when it comes to emerging markets or potentially looking at national shortages. That funding methodology when we were looking at driver training, for example, in terms of the national shortages, that kind of flexibility and nimbleness is not there. In terms of investment, as Peter has said, it is very short-term. It is only four years or so, and that does not encourage further investment, particularly when the financial reconciliation period takes such a long time.

Q289 Apsana Begum: You say none of the revenue that has been made has been invested back to FE colleges.



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Andrea Greer: In many cases we have to spend more. For example, we spent a further £1 million in terms of the IT infrastructure that was needed and not apparent in the at the due diligence stage.

Sally Alexander: It is worth commenting that since the pandemic we have been in a costs-only model. We have to submit our costs every month to the commercial department who will assess what are acceptable costs for us to earn. That does not include making profits, so it is only reasonable costs we are allowed to earn and those have not been reconciled for a year and a quarter so we still do not know what money we have.

Q290 **Apsana Begum:** Just the managing the contract—that is the length of it and that is it. There is no flexibility to think beyond that.

Sally Alexander: It is a very tight financial contract and it is a very risky contract.

Peter Cox: Just the three FE corporations meeting our social mission delivery in terms of not making profit. We, for example, have invested over £12 million back in IT and hold risk in the contract in the way they are commercialised.

Q291 **Chair:** Do you think the prison education contracts should be provided by people like yourselves—not-for-profit social enterprises—or does it make any difference whether the private sector also has these contracts?

Andrea Greer: Ultimately, we are the experts in prison education in terms of education, so it should be playing to the strengths of those particular providers. Given the experience we have, we play a key role in moving that forwards.

Q292 **Chair:** Do you think it would be better if all the providers were not-for-profit social enterprises?

Andrea Greer: You need to bring in as much healthy competition as possible. That is an important part of it, but you would expect me to say that colleges are particularly well placed to fulfil the demands of the contract, absolutely.

Sally Alexander: I would not say that public is best and private is worst, or private is best and public is worst, which I know people tend to get on a hobby-horse about. It is whoever has the expertise and skills to get through, but an FE college, particularly in terms of the employer engagement agenda and being aligned to the DfE agenda, is really important.

Something else we bring to the table that makes it quite challenging for us, and could make it very challenging for us going forward, is our commitment to the teachers' pension scheme, and that is a significant financial input we have to make that makes it a quite financially challenging contract for us.

Q293 **Chair:** I would welcome that it was not just four providers, but there would



be more FE colleges doing this. They are a social enterprise and, from what I have seen—despite my questions at the beginning—it would be a very good system to have.

Sally Alexander: When I started and probably when you started as well, Peter, there was more or less one FE college. We started with HMP Woodhill, a prison in Milton Keynes, and it would be more or less one prison per one provider, and there were 130 or 140 providers across the country.

Q294 **Chair:** Personally I would prefer more FE. I am not saying have no private sector, but more FE colleges doing this. Do you want to comment on that?

Andrea Greer: No, I am just agreeing with you.

Peter Cox: For the record, Novus is part of LTE group, which is also a further education corporation, including the Manchester College and so on. We have been delivering similar to Milton Keynes for over 30 years, back to the days of the local authority—the LEAs—so it is something that is the passion and heart of what we do as organisations and FE providers.

Sophie Sterling: It is the right answer that we have the right people round the table. FE colleges are definitely the right place for them. If you take PeoplePlus, we are part of the Staffline Group—we place 51,000 people into jobs every single day. We have those employer networks we can tap into on a national basis. Making a distinction between one or the other is not the point. It has to be about what is right in terms of moving the sector forward, and there needs to be recognition that everybody can bring a lot to the table there.

Chair: I have gone up against private providers and I have seen the work PeoplePlus do on apprenticeships in general, which is very impressive. I also have a view about the work that FE colleges do—it is, on the whole, quite extraordinary—and I would welcome it being wider than just four providers, with many more FE colleges having contracts.

Q295 **Dr Johnson:** A question for Peter about continuity, my hobby-horse during this inquiry. If you are in 43 prisons and a couple of young offenders' institutes, what holds back prisoners from being able to continue a course they have started at the point they move either into an adult prison estate or within the adult prison estate?

Peter Cox: There are two or three key things from our observations. Firstly, around the timing of the transition, that is critical, as sometimes it goes beyond the control of the education provider—it is the prison service system and a prison service decision. That can be a very unhelpful factor when an individual is part way through a course.

Secondly, it is where an individual is transferred to in the estate. We have had individuals who have been competently progressing on a course in HMYOI Cookham Wood in Rochester and, because of population challenges, have been transferred to the young offender institution in Deerbolt in the north-east, which creates barriers in terms of distance to transition. The



wider support around that young person then becomes a barrier. They become disengaged.

Thirdly, it is what is being commissioned. There is a different model and a different level of intervention and curriculum being commissioned in the under-18 estate that provides currently for up to 30 hours of education a week, including PE, as opposed to a much lesser volume in the adult estate.

Q296 Dr Johnson: Are the courses you are offering in the adult estate so different? If you were moving home with your family, you would expect you could continue similar courses, potentially with another provider. Are you doing vastly different courses in different institutions that you are not able to just bring somebody into somebody else's class doing the same thing?

Peter Cox: The range of courses can be different. It depends where the young person is transitioned to in the adult estate and what curriculum is on offer there. On some occasions the curriculum offer is different at the receiving establishment from where the individual has been within the youth estate.

Q297 Dr Johnson: Does online provision—the remote learning we have seen throughout schools this last 12 to 18 months—offer any solutions to you?

Peter Cox: It could potentially offer solutions. The challenge is the security requirements put down by the Ministry of Justice that prevent some of the transition of the great work in the community into custody around security concerns.

Q298 Tom Hunt: I am aware whenever somebody comes into prison that there is a learning needs assessment. Recently, in 2019, you started screening those who come in for learning disabilities. How effective do you think this is? How intensive is it? What does it involve?

Sophie Sterling: Since September 2020, we have worked alongside MoJ, along with other providers to create a revised initial assessment screening tool. It now looks like a two-stage approach done at the point the individual enters into education. The first stage is a rapid assessment that is undertaken with every learner that comes into education and it aims to identify SEND, LDD or any potential indicators that need to be looked in to further.

The second stage assessment is very much more detailed and is done with a specialist expert in LDD on a one-to-one basis privately, away from the classroom to enable and create that extra enhanced level that was not there before in terms of getting further and deeper under the skin of the individual needs for that individual learner.

Q299 Tom Hunt: Everybody who comes into prison gets that initial first stage. Everyone will get screened to see whether they might have a learning disability.

Sophie Sterling: Yes.



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Q300 **Tom Hunt:** Then if there is a sense there might be an issue, they will get the second stage. Does that second stage involve an educational psychologist?

Sophie Sterling: Yes. For us, we use our regional inclusion managers. I have a colleague, Sarah Jones, who is a special educational needs expert who was heavily involved with the Ministry of Justice. Those regional inclusion managers have 20-plus years in specialist special education roles.

Q301 **Tom Hunt:** They are not necessarily educational psychologists.

Sophie Sterling: I will have to check her qualifications on that one. The type of person who occupies those roles for us is the go-to industry expert specialist who would be able to advise across all our provision as to what the appropriate tailoring needs to be for that individual. For example, with autism, we look at shaping that learner journey so that they have bite-sized sessions with us, as opposed to sitting in a classroom for three hours becoming distracted.

Q302 **Tom Hunt:** How effective and accurate do you think that first step that everyone gets is in flagging up issues? Do you think it is intensive enough?

Andrea Greer: We would try to take a wider view and a more holistic approach. There is more that can be done with prison staff as well. What we have done at Weston is have a SEND centre of excellence and we share best practice. It means we can train prison officers, or heads of learning and skills or other HMPPS staff in LDD and SEND good practice as well, and that has proved very valuable in terms of taking that holistic approach. It works best when HMPPS staff, Weston College staff and the providers work together in partnership.

Q303 **Tom Hunt:** The statistics we have indicate approximately one third of those in prison have some kind of learning disability. Do you think that is an underestimate?

Sally Alexander: I could tell you from the first year of the PEF contracts, 19 to 20, that within our 19 prisons our figures were 44%. Interestingly too, where people were locked down it came out as high as 60%, and it is interesting to know why it is so high—whether people were being more honest and completing assessments when they previously did not want to compete assessments. We identified a higher need in the second year of the contract but, like colleagues, we have specialist staff on the ground and we have regional staff who are level 7 qualified experts to support.

Another model we have taken that was referred to earlier in another context is we are in the long-term estate, which gives us an advantage in terms of stability of the prisoners. We train up a lot of those prisoners to support other prisoners who have special educational needs to work with them within the classrooms. Where the contract will not always allow us to employ a lot of additional staff, we will use the prisoners as peer mentors to support those special needs.



Q304 **Tom Hunt:** Why do you think there are so many people with special needs who end up in prison?

Sally Alexander: That is a very big question. I think they are people who possibly have not been successful. They could have had a poorer education or not engaged with education because of their needs. In the wider community it may have not been picked up and they have fallen into a life of crime in order to get by because they cannot get employment. That is probably a whole other Select Committee.

Q305 **Ian Mearns:** Following on from that, in terms of people in the prison population who have previously undiagnosed special educational needs, and there must be many of them, how do you do a proper assessment of what needs to be done to create a bespoke educational package for them? That is pretty resource intensive. We know special educational needs is very costly in the state education sector per individual, so if you are coming across a lot of people who have previously undiagnosed or diagnosed and not properly addressed special educational needs, how effectively do you think collectively you are doing those bespoke educational packages for those people?

Peter Cox: It is challenging. Like other providers, we have specialist SENCOs supporting a cluster of prisons—specialist staff. Once the initial assessment is completed, the rapid screen, there is further follow-up around in-depth screening to identify specific needs and challenges, and the support required for a learner. One thing to highlight to the Committee is something that was lost in 2019 with the PEF contract and the move to the Ministry of Justice is the option to access additional funding support for learners with special educational needs that used to be in place through the DfE and SFA programmes.

Sophie Sterling: To answer your question about how effective we are, when I go into prisons, I am constantly overwhelmed by the work my colleagues do on the ground. These are difficult cohorts to work with and the innovations they put in place around Covid-19, we have Redepends, for example, to help people with low literacy levels. It constantly amazes me, so I think we do a good job.

Q306 **Ian Mearns:** Having been a chair of governors of a special needs primary school many years ago, I know how long it takes to have an interaction with an educational psychologist to properly diagnose and address the needs of individual children. It must be equally complex with adults. Adults can probably express themselves a little bit more effectively than some children but, if we are to get this right, we have to spend a lot more money and have the professionals to do that assessment much more effectively at the initial stage.

Sally Alexander: To add to your comment, we are not working with every single prisoner within the prison, so there could be a significant number of people we are not working with who have special educational needs. For me, it needs to be a more holistic approach rather than just coming in



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through funding through us as the educational provider. Some of our prisons have a very small contract so we will not see a large number of prisoners, so having a different strategy to approach that would be really helpful.

Q307 Ian Mearns: I am interested to know how governors have responded to the increased responsibility they may have with the education provided in their prison. Has it been universally welcomed by the governors out there?

Sally Alexander: Under the previous contract a governor could be as involved as they wanted to with the contract. That is sometimes forgotten in terms of their not having any authority or ability to influence the contract. Under OLASS 4 we would have monthly meetings with our governors where we would discuss curriculum and decisions would be made.

I think those same governors that showed an interest, and relished their input, still have that same level of interest and involvement under the new contract and probably the governors who have different priorities are less involved. I am not sure it has had a massive impact, but they have a greater responsibility now than they had before.

Q308 Ian Mearns: Andrea, in your written evidence you state you would like training providers to have more autonomy to develop a prisons curriculum. What issues are you encountering with the new commissioning system that leads you to want to take power away from governors over that?

Andrea Greer: It is not at all about taking power away from governors. As Sally says, we have an excellent relationship with our governors in the main. It is more about having flexible enough funding that has enough reach to allow an innovative curriculum. In many cases, as you have heard today, the governors will do their best with the facilities they have in often outdated prisons.

If you are to move a bricks workshop, for example, to motor vehicle, and you are looking at hybrid motor vehicle workshops, it will cost a lot of money to do that. They do the best they can with limited funds, but that can sometimes be the case. As providers, we want to have more autonomy to use our influence from our own work we do within our colleges and private training providers to bring the 21st century into prisons. Obviously that has to be funded appropriately so that the learners receive the same service as they do elsewhere.

Q309 Ian Mearns: Peter, what challenges exist in delivering education in a justice setting, and what needs to be done to remove those challenges and barriers?

Peter Cox: One of three key barriers in terms of the culture, the establishment, and leadership and management is having a prison that is education-focused to facilitate successful progression. The second is around and linked to the culture and the regime, where to provide a quality



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service we are looking at appropriate progression, in a timely way, of the individual learner. The biggest inhibitor is the regime and attendance.

For example, in the first year of the PEF contract, our biggest challenge was around attendance, when we had less than six in 10 seats occupied in a classroom. That is really inhibiting the ability for individual prisoners to upskill themselves and drive forward.

The third biggest challenge is ensuring prisoner education does not become isolated and an island around the wider adult FE reforms we see regarding aspiration in terms of driving forward the introduction of T-levels and level 3 qualifications—going back to my earlier point—with capital investment to enable that to happen. I see that as critical to equip learner needs and give them the skills that employers require for future growth and prosperity.

Q310 Ian Mearns: I want to be kind to prison governors. It might be that an awful lot of prison governors would want to engage in this much more positively but the problem they have is resources—the staffing to facilitate the movement of prisoners into education within the prison setting. Is that a fair assessment?

Peter Cox: I would say that is a fair assessment. Governors have a very difficult and challenging job in terms of their officer role. Some of the challenges around attendance is the number of officers in place who support a good, timely implementation of the regime.

Q311 Ian Mearns: Would people generally agree with that?

Sally Alexander: That is a fair point. One of the approaches to address that is about looking at digital infrastructure in prisons. It was really exposed at the beginning of the pandemic, if I compare it to what we were doing in our main FE college, where the focus was getting everything online and supporting people to do their classes through Teams.

We had to get our staff working out how to become base distance learning experts: putting everything on to pieces of paper, getting it photocopied, and getting it sent out and back. It just exposed how behind the times we are in terms of that digital infrastructure. We have that access within some classrooms within education, but we need that across the whole prison estate so that, even if a prisoner cannot get to us, they can access their education.

Chair: Thank you. Because of broadcasting restrictions—not because of me—we have to finish at 12 pm. Ian, if we could just combine your next questions we will move on to our colleagues.

Q312 Ian Mearns: How do you ensure that there is enough choice and opportunity in the curriculum for offenders across the prison estate—the thing about education being vitally important in rehabilitation and people possibly progressing into a proper crime-free life after they leave?

Chair: If we can just ask one of you to answer that, please—perhaps Andrea.



Andrea Greer: I have touched on the subject already, but it is important not to view the curriculum in isolation. It is a learner journey and it has to be a meaningful journey. Coming back to that point about apprenticeships—are you happy for me to talk about it at this stage?

Chair: Hopefully we have time. We are going to come on to it in a second, but if you want to bring it up that is fine.

Andrea Greer: Yes, absolutely. It is key and it would potentially be a game-changer because, as you know, there are many barriers to that at the moment. Again, bringing it back to the learners in prison, giving them the same opportunities and the same experience as learners on the outside, and bringing them into the 21st century—we have already touched on T-levels and so on—is something that we see as absolutely key, but there needs to be additional funding to produce a more innovative curriculum.

Ian Mearns: It just seems to me, given what is happening out in the world at the moment, that if we could invent a heavy goods vehicle driving simulator so that prisoners could learn to drive on a simulator of a heavy goods vehicle, that might be a good idea.

Chair: I will bring in Kim, because she has not spoken in this session, and then David Johnston. David, first.

Q313 **David Johnston:** First to Sophie, these are questions about your evidence: you say that classroom teaching should be lost. Can you explain your reasons behind that?

Then, Sally, you understandably talked about successful vocational partnerships needing to involve you, the prison and the employer. What is getting in the way of that at the moment, if anything? Sophie first.

Sophie Sterling: In our written evidence, what we were alluding to was—it has already been spoken about today, so I will not spend too much time on it—the classroom can have very negative connotations to some of our learners in terms of previous experiences. That can be where they have drifted away, or they have felt unsupported, called out and embarrassed, and there are some very significant negative behaviours.

We do not want that in our classrooms. That is not an effective environment. As I said earlier, looking around our estate, it is very much the prisons that have adopted a college feel towards them, where individual learners are able to take more autonomy over their own learning and they are able to feel comfortable in their surroundings. They are able to showcase their work. That works incredibly well in terms of them feeling a sense of pride. You cannot underestimate what that means to individuals in the cohort within this setting.

In our evidence, what we are trying to say is that providers and the estate should think differently about what the classroom looks like. In terms of remote learning, we have invested heavily in digital learning. Our Wayout



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TV offer is now in 65 prisons across the UK and was a critical communications platform for governors to be able to continue to communicate with prisoners while they were spending upwards of 23 hours in a cell.

Q314 **David Johnston:** Is your point basically that you do teach people in groups, but it should not feel like a classroom?

Sophie Sterling: Yes, and there is a digital element as well. What the pandemic has shown is that we do not need to be in the classroom all the time. There can be a real blend, and it is about what is right for the individual—neither is right or wrong in terms of classroom-based or digital.

Sally Alexander: We developed a model where we worked with 25 to 30 national employers. It is very important to say that having a national employer working with you is important because you do not necessarily know where somebody is going to be resettled. We develop programmes with employers. We asked employers what they wanted, what we could do in order to get the prisoners ready for them, and then put that programme in place.

It was a programme that was very much like a traineeship, where we identify prisoners with the right mindset, support them, get their maths and English, get their employability skills and then link them up with the employer—it could be a Timpson or a Greggs—where they say, “Teach them this course for three weeks. We will come in and be involved. We will come and work with them in the last week. We will offer them a work placement.” Or it could be somebody like RMF Construction that we worked with who came in and taught the course.

Then the guys would leave prison on a Friday and they would start a job on the Monday. As opposed to us thinking, “We will do a diploma in construction,” we went to the employers and said, “What can we do that will make them employable?” They told us and that is what we delivered. That was the flexibility that we had under the previous contract, which isn’t quite there under this contract, and it enabled us to put a significant number of prisoners into work.

Q315 **Kim Johnson:** How do you ensure that education provision meets local employer need? We have a massive shortage in the hospitality sector at the moment. What are the challenges getting offenders into jobs, particularly black offenders who are over-represented in the prison system and under-represented within the workforce?

Sally Alexander: Just to re-emphasise what I was just saying, to get the local market information is important but it is also important to take a national view about national trends, as in hospitality and catering, and logistics, because we don’t know where the guys are going. Then, as I said, it is working with organisations to see what is going to make that need. You then need to adapt the environment that you are teaching in—whether it is a classroom or whether it is a workshop—in order to deliver it.



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In terms of people from different backgrounds, we have that data to hand. We will look at that and we will support people. We will work with employers. We will not work with employers that we don't feel meet our standards in terms of working. We do an assessment of the employers that we will work with, or the subcontractors that we will work with, in order to encourage an open approach to who they are employing.

Sophie Sterling: As I mentioned earlier, PeoplePlus is part of Staffline Group. We recruit. We put 51,000 people into work every day, day in, day out. What that facilitates is access to that huge employer network. What is interesting post-Covid is what employers are saying to us. Nobody prior to Covid would have said, "We don't want to work with people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or from offending backgrounds," but I think an element of social conscience has come into it, with employers proactively telling us they want to do the right thing. Then you add into that that real commercial driver. For example, with drivers, there is a 100,000 candidate shortage. You have not just got the aspiration; you have the real commercial driving need for it. When you look on that on a national basis, it is absolutely the right thing to do.

Prisons can sometimes be very inwardly focused, and the key and the answer to unlocking all this from a PeoplePlus point is about looking outside the prison, taking that information, bringing it in, shaping the curriculum, training people and tapping into that untapped talent pool.

Q316 **Kim Johnson:** Sophie, are you saying that more black offenders are now being employed within the workforce from prison?

Sophie Sterling: It is about helping the employer to understand the benefits of that. When you illustrate that with real life examples and you say, "This is not just somebody's job; it is a lifestyle change for them," it then becomes a human thing, and it is about taking that employer on that journey, helping and working with them to overcome the challenges, because they are challenging cohorts in terms of an ex-offender background. It is about helping employers to realise the benefit of recruiting from there.

Q317 **Chair:** Just finally, to me personally one of the biggest questions is the apprenticeship question. I know you have written to us about the double funding issue. How do we make it happen? What is the answer to this? What is the key recommendation that we need to put in our report to have prison apprenticeships? I will put it to all of you and then we will conclude because of broadcasting issues. Andrea.

Andrea Greer: As I said before, it is changing that legislation by making sure that potentially the prison could be the employer, or that we have that in place. It is looking at the number of hours that would be needed to do the apprenticeship, and it is removing any other kind of barriers in terms of pay rates as well, because they would need to be at a national minimum wage level. They are the three key points.



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Q318 **Chair:** You think it is possible to introduce them in prisons if there is the will?

Andrea Greer: Absolutely.

Sally Alexander: To add to that, also look at the model of traineeships, which is a route into an apprenticeship, which may suit some prisoners better. Looking at traineeships and apprenticeships, the Government offer a financial incentive to employers. It is looking at incentivising employers and providers, which will not be us when people go outside necessarily, to actually engage with prisoners, which will be a good route.

Q319 **Chair:** Do you think it is possible to amend the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill to bring in legislation to make this happen?

Sally Alexander: I would love to see that. There is a desire to but it always goes to the bottom of the in-tray.

Chair: Not with me it won't.

Sophie Sterling: I will not reiterate points already made by colleagues. I think there is another opportunity to look at ROTL—the return on temporary licence—and the ability to release. There is sometimes a reticence with governors for very real reasons around security, but that is something that we could look at.

Peter Cox: About three years ago we did a pilot on apprenticeships—we engaged 257 prisoners in it. They told us a lot in terms of changes. Key barriers and changes required are to improve ROTL and support from governors and engagement around it. The other key barrier is progression on release where the work currently done, or would have been done in custody, is discounted from the community providers funding support, so prisoners will become less attractive as a learner because of the discounting funding level. That is something critical that needs to be addressed with the process.

Chair: Perhaps you could help us with looking at ideas for amendments for the legislation that will come through later in the year. It is in the Lords until October, as you know, but it will come to us in the House of Commons soon. It will be very interesting to see if you have ideas that you could send to us.

We have finished exactly on time, which is amazing. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you for taking the sustained questioning, which it is important for us to do. It is appreciated and the work that you do is appreciated as well. I understand that it is incredibly difficult, and that the climate and the resources are also incredibly difficult, but it is our job to ask the questions.