

## **Written evidence submitted by the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PRI0043)**

### **About the Prisoner Learning Alliance**

The Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) is a network of organisations and individuals with an interest and expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to advocate for improvements and we hold the government to account by monitoring prison education. We have nearly 400 members across the sector, including education providers, professional bodies, people with lived experience, teachers and voluntary sector organisations.<sup>1</sup> Prisoners' Education Trust provides our secretariat.

### **(1) Introduction**

The PLA welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry on the prison operational workforce. We have limited our responses to the questions that relate to the PLA's area of expertise, prison education.

The increased focus in the Ministry of Justice's Prisons Strategy White Paper on ensuring that people leaving prison are able to secure employment is welcome. Education will be key to achieving this, as there is clear and robust evidence that accessing education in prison increases the chances of securing employment on release and reduces the chances of reoffending.<sup>2</sup> Education also has broader benefits, including improving wellbeing, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Prison education is not, however, currently of sufficient quality and not enough people in prison are able to access it. Addressing this must be a priority for the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service if the goals set out in the White Paper are to be achieved. The prison operational workforce has a key role to play in this, as set out in this submission.

### **(2) Responses to questions**

#### **What implications do difficulties in recruiting and retaining OSGs and prison officers have for the ability to provide effective regimes for prisoners?**

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining prison staff, and resultant levels of understaffing, have a significant impact on the delivery of prison education.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the *Covid-19 National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services*<sup>3</sup> placed limitations on prison regimes to control the spread of Covid-19. This saw people in prison spend much more time in their cells than previously, frequently 23 hours per day, and access to education departments was largely suspended. Some in-cell materials were produced, although the availability and quality were mixed.

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<sup>1</sup> While we have sought members' views on this inquiry and gathered information through ongoing engagement, this inquiry response does not necessarily represent the views of any individual or organisational member of the PLA.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-covid-19-prisons-and-youth-custody-settings>

While all prisons formally exited the National Framework in May 2022, to date they have not yet returned to providing full regimes. While this is not a new problem – some prisons had been running a restricted regime for many years before the Covid lockdown – these issues have become more severe during the last three years.

Understaffing plays a key part in this, as with current staffing levels there are frequently not enough officers available to safely move prisoners around the establishment and people cannot therefore get to the activities they have been allocated. This has a huge impact on people in prison. Purposeful activity makes a real difference to prisoners' quality of life. People need activities that offer a sense of meaning, a sense of progress, and a way of assisting them to cope with prison life. This is compromised if access to purposeful activity is limited due to staff shortages.

Restricted access to prison regimes has an inevitable impact on the delivery of prison education, which largely relies on people in prison being able to access classrooms. This requires there to be enough officers available to unlock them and escort them to the education department or to participate in other educational activities (including those procured through the Dynamic Purchasing System). There also has to be sufficient staff to be able to ensure that prisoners arrive on time if the classes are to run as planned. If classes start late or have to finish early due to staff shortages it affects the quality of what can be delivered. It does not matter how good the provision is if prisoners cannot access it regularly and on time.

This is currently often not possible, hindering the recovery of education provision after Covid-related restrictions. As HM Chief Inspector of Prisons noted in his annual report for 2021-22, staff shortages have been a key obstacle to getting prisoners back into classrooms and workshops in many prisons.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Ofsted noted in its 2021-22 annual report, published in December 2022, that “far too many prisons do not yet offer a full activities regime, due to staff vacancies, for example. This continues to limit severely prisoners' opportunities to access a high-quality education, skills and work curriculum to prepare them for release.”<sup>5</sup>

While there are good operational reasons why escorting prisoners to education departments may not be a priority when prisons are understaffed, if prisoners cannot access education they cannot develop the skills that they need to secure employment on release. The only way to address this, and maximise prisoners' participation in education, is therefore to increase prison officer numbers. This has to include improving retention as well as increasing recruitment, as a shortage of experienced officers can also be a barrier to running a full regime. Officers also need to understand how the education department in their prison operates, so they can work efficiently with education staff and ensure that prisoners' time out of cell is used effectively. A stable workforce makes this easier to achieve.

However, the impact of staff shortages on prison education goes beyond just the capacity of staff to escort prisoners to education departments. A shortage of prison officers also reduces the opportunities for staff to build positive relationships with prisoners, as they are simply too busy to spend time with prisoners and give them individual attention. This can have a detrimental impact on prisoners' engagement with education, as a supportive officer can help them to motivate and encourage them to participate. Particularly for the most vulnerable or

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<sup>4</sup> p.54: HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2022) *Annual Report 2021-22*.

<sup>5</sup> p.89: Ofsted (2022) *The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22*.

disengaged prisoners, they will be much more likely to come into contact with a prison officer than a member of education staff, and may only participate in education if that prison officer encourages and supports them to do so. This was recognised in *Unlocking Potential*, Dame Sally Coates's landmark 2016 review of education in prison, which highlighted the importance of prison officers in engaging prisoners in education.<sup>6</sup> This will only be possible, however, if they have sufficient time to spend with each prisoner.

### **How effective is the initial training, professional supervision, and continuous professional development provided to prison staff?**

As well as capacity, buy-in from officers is also key to delivering high quality education in prison, but prison officers do not always understand the importance of education or the impact it can have on reducing reoffending. To address this, an understanding of the importance of education, and what prison officers can do to support prisoners to engage in education, should be a core part of the training that all new prison officers complete.

This was recognised by the Education Select Committee in the report of their inquiry on prison education, which stated that “prison officers should also receive training to ensure that they understand the importance of education in supporting prisoners to find employment and reducing reoffending, so they develop a positive attitude towards the role that education has to play in prisons”.<sup>7</sup>

We therefore welcome the fact that the Government has accepted the Education Select Committee's recommendation, stating that HM Prison and Probation Service is “working to ensure the new prison officer apprenticeship programme contains relevant content on the importance of education, skills and work for prisoner rehabilitation within the training package” and is “exploring other opportunities to provide prison officers with CPD related to education, skills, and work”.<sup>8</sup> This builds on the commitment in the Prisons Strategy White Paper to develop a learning module on “education and skills requirements to improve prisoners' literacy and numeracy levels and prepare them for the workplace”.<sup>9</sup> We await further detail on what this new training will involve. It is important, though, that its development involves prison teachers and people with lived experience of prison education.

There is also the potential for prison officers to contribute to the training and development of prison teachers. *Hidden Voices*<sup>10</sup>, a report on the experiences of teachers working in prisons published jointly by the PLA and University and College Union (UCU) in 2021, found that education staff would welcome more input from prison officers in their training to help them better understand the prisons that they work in. While this would benefit prison teachers, we believe that it would also benefit prison officers, who would get to better understand education provision within their prison and the people who deliver it.

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<sup>6</sup> p.24-25: Dame Sally Coates (2016) *Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison*.

<sup>7</sup> p.13: House of Commons Education Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity, First Report of Session 2022-23*.

<sup>8</sup> p.2: House of Commons Education Committee (2022) *Government response to the Committee's First Report, Second Special Report of Session 2022-23*.

<sup>9</sup> p.61: Ministry of Justice (2021) *Prisons Strategy White Paper*.

<sup>10</sup> [https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Hidden\\_voices\\_Aug2021.pdf](https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Hidden_voices_Aug2021.pdf)

For the same reason, joint training involving both prison officers and education staff would also be beneficial. An expert Working Group on Professional Development for Prison Educators, convened by the PLA, concluded in its final report in October 2022<sup>11</sup> that there should be more collaboration between prison officers and prison educators and recommended that “Governors develop a training plan for the whole prison, including...involving prison teachers in regular ongoing training and development opportunities with officers and other staff”. The Working Group also suggested that it would be helpful for trainee prison officers to spend some time in prison education.

In general, in addition to training specifically on education and related issues, the PLA supports providing a broad range of high-quality training for prison officers. As well as enhancing their skills and knowledge, this would help to create a learning culture within prisons. This would benefit both prisoners and staff alike.

### **(3) Prison teachers**

While we recognise that the subject of this inquiry is prison officers, and have focused our submission on this, we also wanted to draw the Committee’s attention to another key part of the prison workforce, prison teachers. The PLA believes that we are potentially facing a workforce crisis in prison teaching. Teachers in prison receive lower wages than in the community, and there are concerns about the lack of professionalisation of prison teaching as a career. There are limited opportunities for promotion, insufficient investment in training and little job security. Taken together, these factors create a reluctance to join the prison education workforce.

Moreover, as with prison officers it is not only the number of prison teachers that is important, but also the level of experience and expertise. We know that many new teachers are excellent, but we also know that familiarity with the role can be needed to navigate the complexities of a prison environment. Yet retention is an issue, with research for the PLA and UCU report *Hidden Voices* finding that seven in ten teachers were considering leaving prison education in the next five years. The combination of an ageing workforce and people leaving due to elevated levels of stress and poor pay and conditions is a cause for significant concern.

The PLA therefore believes that alongside their work on prison officers, the Ministry of Justice needs to look at the prison workforce as a whole and develop a strategy to work with education providers to ensure that we recruit, retain and develop the prison teachers that we need to deliver high-quality education in prison.

### **(4) Conclusion**

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<sup>11</sup> <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/PLA-Working-Group-Professional-Development-for-Prison-Educators.pdf>

The shortage of prison officers is immobilising the prison system and having a detrimental effect on the delivery of prison education. In order to deliver education in prison effectively, which is key to improving wellbeing and ensuring that people leave prison with the knowledge and skills that they need to secure employment, it is essential that:

- a) There are sufficient prison officers overall, and enough experienced prison officers in particular, to ensure that prisoners are able to attend education and training consistently and on time.
- b) Prison officers have the capacity and knowledge to support prisoners to engage with prison education provision and to continue to participate.
- c) Prison officers understand the benefits of prison education and what they can do to support prisoners to participate in it. This requires the right initial training and ongoing continuing professional development.

The Ministry of Justice is currently developing plans for a new Prisoner Education Service to improve the quality of prison education provision. For this to be a success the right support needs to be in place, including from operational prison staff.

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