

Written evidence submitted by the Catholic Church (Bishops' Conference of England and Wales)

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales submission to Education Select Committee inquiry *Education: Are prisoners being left behind?*

Catholic chaplains work in every prison across England and Wales, providing spiritual and pastoral care to prisoners, staff and families.

They also offer religious education to prisoners including study groups, Bible groups and structured courses such as *Alpha* or *Inside Faith*. These are well received by prisoners, who have highlighted the importance of such programmes in deepening their faith and connecting them with other people. Around a quarter of Catholic prisoners express a desire for more study groups.¹

However, a significant number of prisoners also face difficulty accessing chaplaincy services, especially due to scheduling clashes in regimes.²

Throughout the Covid-19 lockdown Catholic chaplains have provided special resources including study packs for prisoners. New resources have been delivered every week and prisoners have been given the opportunity discuss them during face-to-face chaplaincy visits at the cell door. This service has been widely welcomed by prisoners and staff during an extremely difficult period.

More generally religious education provided by chaplains of all faiths has many benefits including:

- helping people come to terms with their actions and supporting rehabilitation
- helping people feel more confident in their own faith, making them less vulnerable to radicalisation
- providing a valuable opportunity for people who have difficulty learning in more traditional classroom settings

It is therefore important to recognise these groups and courses as an integral part of education provision in prison, complementing academic or vocational programmes.

We strongly encourage the government to ensure that chaplaincy-led education is treated on an equal footing alongside other educational opportunities, including being properly resourced and sufficiently prioritised in regimes.

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¹ *Belief & Belonging*, Catholic Bishops' Conference (2016)

² *Belief & Belonging*, Catholic Bishops' Conference (2016)