

Written evidence submitted by St Giles

Prison Education Inquiry – Evidence from St Giles

St Giles delivers rehabilitation, employment, and other support services in 30 prisons and 5 UK community locations. Our response to the call for evidence includes former prisoners' perceptions of their experience of prison education and what they think needs to change.

What is the purpose of education in prisons?

Participation in education in prison can significantly reduce reoffending on release; build confidence and motivation to build a more positive life; prepare prisoners for release; enhance the quality of life; and provide the skills and learning to improve employment prospects.

Prison education is also critical because of the background of many prisoners e.g. a third reporting a learning disability or difficulty; 47% having no qualifications; and 42% were expelled or permanently excluded from school.

How well are additional needs met by the prison education and youth custody systems, including SEND and language communication needs?

ESOL is offered in the prison system but generally at a lower level. Prisons need to do more to support speakers of other languages, both on short and longer sentences. This support would likely encourage individuals to take on further courses and progress both inside and upon release.

Prisoners with SEND needs are supported differently, depending on the prison but generally needs additional resourcing and provision. Areas of improvement could include having a dedicated specialist support service within the education department, offering the opportunity to be formally diagnosed and supported to address personal educational challenges, and supporting prisoners to progress both during their sentences and upon release. If the support is offered inside the gate, then individuals may be more willing to engage with educational support services upon release.

External programmes such as the Shannon Trust's Turning Pages and St Giles 'Peer Educators' pilot project, use a peer approach to support some of these individuals who may not be comfortable to attend classes or who need additional learning support in class. This harnesses the skills and capacity of prisoners to help others. St Giles believes strongly that providing peer educational support is highly effective especially on the landings for prisoners that need extra 1-2-1 support and it provides positive role models and encourages prisoners to engage in educational activities.

Does education in prisons deliver the skills needed by employers and what more can be done to better align these?

Responses from ex-prisoners revealed concerns about whether education is delivering the skills needed by employers e.g.

- Sometimes education departments gave those with little or no experience of education false hope of gaining employment upon release. *"I witnessed people being given certificates for writing 3 personal goals. Once people had a few entry level or level 2 certificates gained in*

prison they thought they could be successful on the outside. Speaking with individuals when working in reception (where you are processed upon arrival) I witnessed many return. When asked 'what happened' a common answer was they tried to get a job but were told they did not have relevant qualifications."

- *"In the classroom we were not supported to learn, rather given a task to do and then given the answers to gain the required marks to receive a pass".*
- *"If people are given the proper skills and education in prison this would give them a better chance of securing employment. Having a criminal record means that you have many more challenges at gaining employment and for those who have no work experience this creates an even wider barrier. The prison education system needs to take into account how important it is to prepare individuals for release."*

St Giles supported 700 people into paid employment last year and we have established relations with many larger and small employers. Our experience is that overwhelmingly employers are seeking candidates with: -

- good functional skills
- strong core soft skills and employability, which includes having a positive attitude – skills and 'habits' which research shows can be learnt.
- digital skills

These skills support individuals in other aspects of their lives and equip them with the core skills that they need to navigate the labour market on release and throughout their working lives.

Expanding learning and delivering Level 3 qualifications is also critical to meet the needs of employers and prisoners. Those who had experienced the system felt that the education offered was of too low a level. Also, the number of prisoners accessing level 3 qualifications has decreased. Only 200 people achieved a level 3 qualification in 2017 – 18 via mainstream prison learning – a tenth of the number in 2011 – 12.

The learning pathways that take place in prisons relating to specific job opportunities, with input from employers offer excellent opportunities for prisoners such as rail track, hospitality, and St Giles' Peer Advisor Programme and prison education should align and contribute to these.

Greater and more effective use of ROTL is also a way of linking directly with employers and providing opportunities for prisoners to use their skills and show employers their competence and value.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

Education could be incentivised by linking it to the Incentive and Earned Privileges scheme, for example allowing individuals to earn positive entries when they achieve milestones on particular courses or upon completion. Individuals could gain extra visits or other privileges such as access to family days and it is important to celebrate achievement with family members. At HMP High Down prisoners who completed the St Giles Peer Advice Programme were treated to a meal at the Clinks Restaurant upon gaining their qualification.

HMP Whitmore prison – use an incentivised system that enabled prisoners to gain credit on their personal spends account (Cash bonus incentives) on completion of programmes and were supported to complete courses identified on their individual sentences plans.

Participation can be incentivised by Peers Advisors and Educators promoting and supporting engagement and ensuring that courses are attractive and of good quality.

Inviting ex-prisoners back into the prison to share their success is also very motivating because they are such positive role models and demonstrate that people can really change their lives through education.

How might apprenticeships work for those in custody?

Apprenticeships could work well by using the existing skills-based education on the apprenticeship framework with programmes such as business studies, hairdressing, painting decorating and carpentry, with work placements identified in prison or organised on ROTL. Assessors could visit the prison establishments to assess the work. This could then be a pathway with prisons building better relationships with organisations to offer jobs for those on ROTL and upon release. There would need to be the commitment of the prison regime to enabling these arrangements.

Prison Education needs to link with the planned Prisoner Apprenticeship Pathway to ensure that people have the functional and employability skills to thrive in their apprenticeship.

Are current prisoner learning resources meeting need?

The reported data suggests that this is far from the case. Bromley Briefings report a significant decline in the number of people participating in learning whilst in prison – a 12% drop between 2017 – 18 and the previous year; and a 13% drop in qualifications achieved. The number of English and maths qualifications achieved has also fallen—numbers fell by 29% between the 2011–12 and 2017–18 academic years.

From our experience, classroom environments are not always set up for successful learning. There is also a need for a significant expansion in digital learning. Some establishments now offer better functioning IT. This however could be improved significantly e.g. by giving individuals access to restricted internet services to do online courses and allowing them to submit work, make applications, access webinars and other resources. Prison education teams need to support this – our experience is that people who access distance learning have sought it out themselves due to lack of support from the education department. In turn this would improve IT skills and prepare those in prisons for the outside workforce and accessing services.

An interesting consequence of the COVID restrictions is that many more learning courses are now available on-line and through distant learning packs. St Giles' Learning to Advise course is one of the programmes that has been adapted and is currently being delivered through distance learning packs that prisoners can complete in their cells.

Prison governors having their own budget has enabled some broadening of the education offered, though our experience is that contracts are often delayed and short term, which reduces their potential effectiveness.

How effective and flexible is prison education and training in dealing with different lengths of sentences and the movement of prisoners across the estate?

Prison education is currently not flexible across the state, when individuals are transferred it is often difficult for them to continue courses started in one prison or there can be long delays accessing resources and resuming programmes. This can leave those enrolled demotivated and result in them not completing. Education needs to be able to meet the needs of all prisoners with the opportunity to achieve higher level qualifications that would give them a better chance at competing in the job market upon ROTL or on release.

Shorter sentences result in prisoners not being able to complete a course in the allotted time. If there was a more flexible approach to educational delivery than a prisoner on a short sentence or remand would have more chance of completing a course and developing much needed skills. Offering more in-cell study would also help encourage individuals to complete course material and gain qualifications.

There no coordinated system for transferring prisoners' educational records and history of achievement from one prison to another. This results in prisoners having to be assessed and re-assessed every time they are transferred. The system is disjointed and frustrating. Competition between large providers who "sweep up contracts" across the prison estate also exacerbates these issues.

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