

Written evidence submitted by Prison Reform Trust Prisoner Policy Network

Organisation	The Prison Reform Trust
Authors	Marc Conway and Paula Harriott
Contact	

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison as well as a national prisoner engagement project; The Prisoner Policy Network (PPN)

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to Crime
 - improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families
 - promote equality and human rights in the criminal justice system.
- www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Introduction

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. Please be advised that the answers presented are not the opinions of PRT, but those of people serving prison sentences who are members of our Prisoner Policy Network. For each question for which we had relevant responses, we have presented a short summary of the contributions that we received, supported by direct quotes from the lived experience perspective.

The PPN was launched in July 2018 as part of the Prison Reform Trust's strategic objective to give prisoners a stronger influence in how policy on prisons is made. It is:

- A FREE to join network of prisoners, ex-prisoners, relatives and supporting organisations;
- Hosted by the Prison Reform Trust; and
- Seeks to ensure that prisoners' experiences are part of prison policy development nationally.

It is an emerging network of current serving prisoners, ex-prisoners and connected organisations who want to share their experiences and ideas with policy makers. The PPN aims to share the views of people with experience of living in prison with those involved in prison policy development nationally through research, consultation and reports.

We ask members to share their expertise and experience to develop practical solutions to some of the big challenges facing our prisons. We draw together contributions and include them anonymously in any published report, which is then shared with officials and ministers.

For the purpose of this response, we wrote to the PPN with the following questions

- What is the purpose of education in prisons?
- What data exists to demonstrate the effectiveness of education and training in prisons and on prisoner attainment, including international comparisons?
- How well are additional learning needs met by the prison education and youth custody systems, including SEND and language and communication needs?
- Does education in prisons deliver the skills needed by employers, and what more can be done to better align these?
- How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?
- How might apprenticeships work for those in custody?
- Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?
- What should happen when prison education is assessed as not meeting standards?
- How do variations in the prison estate and infrastructure impact learning?
- How does provision compare in public sector and privately run prisons?
- How effective and flexible is prison education and training in dealing with different lengths of sentences and prisoner transfers across the estate?

This submission collates all the responses we received from 49 serving prisoners across key questions.

“Too much focus on the education business and not enough on the business of educating prisoners “

What is the purpose of education in prisons?

Prisoners responded that the purpose of education needs to be clearly linked to rehabilitation and better life chances.

The importance of education in rehabilitation and desistance from crime was a well-documented theme throughout the feedback.

“Prison should and could be the perfect environment to improve the education level”.

“To develop the Offender and provide an alternative to crime.”

“Education in prison is very-very important because it will help people to change their lives in many ways”

Prisoners identified that a key purpose of prison education ought to be enabling change; assisting prisoners to gain purposeful and appropriate access to opportunities for personal self-development, life skills as well as vocational and professional opportunities that can build life chances on release. Those that had benefitted from educational opportunities in prison were fulsome in their praise and positive outlook for the future.

Respondents were frustrated by an organisational confusion as to purpose; some saying that attending Maths and English felt like a punishment, and some saying that they were being further punished by absence of, and disrupted access to, education courses in prison. One respondent asserted:

“Prison education isn’t education really, it’s just a way of passing convicts time”.

Many respondents asserted that the pronounced focus in education on basic IT, literacy and numeracy up to Level 2, with some vocational skills such as barbering, tiling and decorating was too limiting. The lesser focus on creativity and life skills, such as financial management, tenancy management, and self-care and self-development meant that the Prison Service was missing an opportunity to really equip prisoners to leave prison better able to reintegrate.

“Prison education is not fit for purpose. It is a production line of math’s and English level 1 and 2, rather than personal development and finances”.

Prisoners overwhelmingly said that it was essential to understand that both accessing education and benefiting from education whilst the prison environment was not safe and settled was a real barrier to learning. Prisoners told us that the prison environment can often feel stressful, with competing priorities. Motivation to concentrate on education was impeded because of noise and disrupted regimes which meant that they could not get off the wing to access the education department. Prior poor experiences of education and learning also caused anxiety and triggered feelings of anger and frustration.

“Education purpose has been reduced to ensuring a minimum level of reading and writing, as well as basic arithmetic in line with the government requirements for the unemployed in the community.”

There was a recognition that literacy and numeracy were important skills to develop and augment whilst in prison, but that within a prison, there will always be a cross section of people with varying educational histories and prior attainment ; one prisoner told us of sitting basic assessments on three occasions as he moved prison and wondered why his learner records did not move with him ; another told us of being told that assessments only last six months and as a result he should take the test again, despite studying with the OU; failure to so would have resulted in a negative warning. We heard of certification which recorded courses completed was often left behind when moving prisons as part of progression and that prisoners had to ask family and external agencies to get involved to track down certificates and portfolios of evidence. One prisoner wrote to us from a long term prison asserting that he had lost trust in the education provision after studying for a qualification for two years only for the education department to fail to order his exam paper, and whilst waiting for another exam date, the education provider lost access to the funding for that course and he could not take the exam. Prisoners told of having to buy their own stationary to study from limited cash and that this was a barrier to learning. One prisoner suggested that in prison learning courses should be broken down into modules mapped against courses on offer in the community to support through the gate learning if released on Home Detention Curfew.

Prisoners in the long term A and B category prisons were frustrated by the lack of meaningful education , as they could not access OU courses until further into the sentences , and, since release was far in the future, it also meant that motivation to learn vocational skills without an opportunity for practical extension was difficult to harness.

" I am sitting here doing 24 years and can't see what the purpose here is; I did Level 2 qualifications at school, and now I have to wait until I am six or seven years from release till I can do Open University, I need to keep learning, but looks like its going to be me teaching myself "

One prisoner from the long term estate aired his frustration at being unable to study OU as he was still too far from the eligibility date and had been told he could do it if he provided his own funding , which he felt was deeply unfair.

The educational offer varied according to the prison; in some prisons sport and gym seemed to be a priority, and this was considered to be to the detriment of more academic learning.

Prisoners were concerned that insufficient access to education to build literacy skills meant that some prisoners were unable to access certain sought after jobs and remained stagnant in the prison hierarchy of work; they therefore remained on lower wages throughout their prison sentence.

Prisoners were concerned that older prisoners who were not of working age were ignored in the educational offer and were *"cast aside as redundant and worthless "*. Older prisoners articulated a need to be stretched and to maintain good mental health by exposure to new learning.

What data exists to demonstrate the effectiveness of education and training in prisons and on prisoner attainment, including international comparisons?

Prisoners commented on the lack of data available to them about the educational contract and performance and said that Ofsted reports on establishments were not available in the library..

"I do not have information regarding International comparisons, maybe this is only for professionals and not prisoners."

Prisoners were not informed of what was within the remit of the education contract. This caused distrust in the educational service provider and one prisoner suggested that an annual inspection or audit of the contract should be published so that prisoners could see it.

"as Ofsted does not always paint the real picture "

One prisoner suggested that we need to understand educational participation by monitoring data on mental health, dyslexia, and IEP warnings as these were barriers to participation that were never acknowledged.

Many prisoners criticized prison teaching as formulaic and failed to take into account the varying learnstyles;

“On the out I always taught myself by watching videos on You Tube, but you can’t do that here “

Prisoners spoke highly of the use of peer supporters such as the Shannon Trust to support learners to read. We had a contribution from a prisoner identifying as a woman in a male prison who was unable to attend education because of safety issues.

Several prisoners asserted that there was a noticeable lack of equitable access to education for those with physical and mental challenges.

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

Concerns were raised that education and employment in prison were not always linked. Prisoners suggested that linking prison courses such as decorating and PAT testing to prison maintenance happened in only a few prisons. Our respondents suggested that prison jobs should co- exist with vocational educational courses such as plumbing and electrics thereby creating better employment prospects upon release, creating actual work experience to be added to a C.V.

“We need education in electrics/plumbing, I know a lot of people ask for but are told they are not available”

Job education should be more skilled orientated to enable prisoners to get some employment. I.E. barbering, plumbing e.c.t”

This happened in some prisons, such as Coldingley, Liverpool and Oakwood but not in others. Examples of call centres and training academies by Timpsons and Halfords were welcomed.

“Best thing to support people is to learn proper trades, spend money on that instead of packing work packs”

The use of NVQs was viewed as a way of progressing “on the job” learning.

Poor access to digital technology was experienced by prisoners as frustrating and disabling and left many feeling anxious that they would be left lagging even further behind on release; either because they struggled before going to prison or would be spending many years in custody.

“Being technology illiterate when released from prison is like not being able to read 20 years ago and seriously hampers the chances of employment.”

“Remember some inmates have been in a long time and not seen a mobile phone or ipad”

Prisoners were concerned that the level of vocational qualifications offered in prison were not sufficiently high level to be useful in gaining employment and that equipment in the workshops was outdated.

“Education does not deliver skills necessary for the workplace since equipment is often absent or outdated”

In addition, prisoners serving long sentences in the Cat A and B prisons were aware that lower category prisons were more connected to preparation for employment and thus they felt disconnected from release planning and employment planning

“Lower cat prisons are set up for and equipped to deliver skills required by employers.”

Prisoners told us of moving prisons at critical moments in the delivery timeline and suggested that course completion should be an important feature in any decision to move location.

One prisoner suggested that a national database of prisoner learning and achievements ought to be commissioned and that this database could be shared with prospective employers to match prisoners with vacancies nationally. Prisoners also suggested a version of LinkedIn for each prison, mapping all current and preexisting learning and achievements across each individual prison.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

The PPN report “What incentives work in prison” is an excellent resource in response to this question

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/PPN%20Incentives%20Report.pdf>

Prisoners asserted that there was currently no involvement of prisoners in the selection of courses available in each prison and that a mapping and consultation exercise pre contracting with prisoners might raise interest in education and incentivise participation.

Prisoners said that teachers need better training and competences to work in prison and understand the unique challenges of the prison setting and how best to motivate learners in this setting.

Singe cells to aid study were suggested, as double and triple cells allow no quiet time to reflect and absorb education.

Prisoners told us of poor levels of support from prison staff for education and that this caused low levels of participation

Prisoners told us that when additional learning beyond Level 2 was generally distance learning and conducted in own time in cell; this time spent therefore did not attract pay per session as prison work ; paying additional wages for successful completion of in cell distance learning milestones was suggested as a means to motivating participation.

Several respondents spoke of how validation, and positive write ups in prisoner records was incentivising, as this could lead to swifter progression. Prisoners suggested additional phone credit, days off from work, extra gym and pay enhancements for meeting goals and targets.

Incentivisation of learning could be achieved by access to a careers adviser who could support prisoner learners to map progression goals and thus incentivise learning.

March 2021