

Supplementary written evidence from Novus

QUESTION 1: Are there currently differences in the provision of education services offered in women's and men's prisons. If there is, should there be?

Women's education delivery differs in response to the significant differences in the needs of learners. For example:

- 50% of female prisoners have suffered domestic abuse
- 53% were subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a child
- C.70% have never been employed
- Female prisoners are more likely to have been imprisoned for non-violent offences than male prisoners
- A high number of female prisoners have dependent children – an estimated 17,000 children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment every year
- Women are more likely to self-declare mental health as a disability/health condition compared to the male prison population
- Women are held, on average, 63 miles from their homes, with a significant number held more than 100 miles from their home, compared to an average of 50 miles for men

The core curriculum available to male and female prisoners is similar, including access to numeracy, literacy and employment-focused skills training. However, the methods of delivery, wraparound support, personal aspirations and resources all vary, which drives a service which is different to the men's estate. This draws on the "holistic, women-centred, integrated approach" highlighted in the Corston Report.

Delivery methodology

Delivery approaches used with female prisoners are more trauma-informed, in response to the differing prior experiences of women prisoners. Our delivery methods are adapted accordingly, with our teaching staff being fully trained in using learning pedagogies which augment wider approaches to overcoming traumatic life experiences.

Another key difference is the requirement for additional flexibility across the women's estate. With a shorter average sentence duration than among male prisoners, our programmes of study include more, shorter learning aims which are achievable within a custodial sentence. This allows credit accumulation and supports transition as individuals are moved across the estate and into community provision upon release.

Sequencing of interventions/support

The needs of men and women prisoners often differ and our learning offer in each estate flexes to meet those needs. Levels of functional maths and English needs are consistent across both prison populations, however 7 in 10 women prisoners have never been employed. This increases the requirement for interventions which overcome preconceptions, prepare individuals for education and normalise learning – this includes higher levels of personal and social development support

(e.g. confidence building). For example, wraparound and integrated mental health support is more prominent in the women's estate. Conversely, neurodiversity issues (e.g. autism) are often undisclosed or hidden by women prisoners, meaning they may not be picked up until after initial assessments have taken place. As a result, individuals' needs are assessed on an ongoing basis to ensure they have access to appropriate programmes of learning.

Many of the barriers to work for those who have never entered employment are foundational and need to be addressed before wider skills learning can take place successfully. This requires cross-regime collaboration. This naturally leads to a greater early focus on foundational and enrichment activity in the women's estate, to engage them more fully and prepare them for more employer-focused learning.

Sectoral/labour market differences

Our provision focuses on enabling prisoners to achieve employment on their release. The higher prevalence of female prisoners with childcare or caring responsibilities acts as a pull towards sectors with more flexible working conditions. For example, the flexibility of the hair and beauty sector (e.g. rent-a-chair) and its self-employment opportunities results in a higher demand for learning from female prisoners. In addition, where a major employer builds a close working relationship with us and can guarantee interviews or jobs to our prison learners, this increases the popularity/demand for certain courses (e.g. hospitality courses linked to Greene King).

Resource differences

The women's estate typically benefits from around 27% more investment per prisoner place. As an FE College not driven by a commercial profit motive, Novus is able to invest more of this resource into the learning provision, facilitating much of the above enrichment and personal/social development activity as well as wider staff training (e.g. trauma-informed delivery). Despite this difference, investment is still significantly below comparative community-based learning (e.g. FE provision – see response to question 2 below).

Should there be a difference?

Given the differences in the two learner cohorts, we believe there absolutely should be a difference in the learning offers. Without a more trauma-centred approach, learning would fail to have an impact on engaging and raising the aspiration of women learners. We believe that the differing needs and labour market choices women (particularly those with dependent children) offenders make as a whole population also necessitate flex in the application and prevalence of certain components of a consistent learning offer.

However, the resource differential per prisoner place is equally significant, enabling a richer, more holistic service to be offered to women prisoners.

QUESTION 2: We have heard that qualifications at level 3 or above are scarce. What are you doing to address this?

There are significant obstacles to increasing the delivery of qualifications at level 3 and above within prison education.

Constraint 1: Needs of learners

Based on our initial assessments, 89% of our learners are at level 1 or below in maths and 87% are at level 1 or below in English. Progressing learners from a level 1 to a level 3 qualification typically first requires the achievement of level 2 standards in maths and English and often within the same subject area.

What are we doing about this? We place a significant emphasis on developing functional skills in order to improve prisoners' ability to progress to level 2 and level 3+ qualifications. We offer a diverse curriculum with multiple, higher-level opportunities on site, online and via distance learning.

Constraint 2: Duration of qualifications

Full level 3 qualifications typically take longer to deliver than those at level 2 and below. In some estates, the typical churn or release cycles would not enable the completion of longer programme of learning. Handover to complete partially-delivered qualifications in either other prisons, or in the community following release, does occur, but this is difficult due to variability in the availability of specific qualifications in different contexts (prison or local community) as well as the mismatch between academic enrolment cycles and prison release times.

What are we doing about this? We are developing stronger links with Further Education providers, via our membership of the Collab Group – a collaborative partnership of the largest FE Colleges in England and Wales – to build continuity learning pathways through the gate for level 3 courses to conclude following release.

Constraint 3: Learning infrastructure

Provision of learning infrastructure is the responsibility of HMP or the contracted prison operator. This factor, largely outside the control of prison education providers, often constrains the variety of curricula and qualification areas which can be delivered. For example, qualifications in skilled trades or engineering may require access to tools and capital equipment which is not readily available in the prison estate. As the economy continues to change, community-based FE provision receives significant capital and infrastructure investment which is absent within a prison learning environment.

What are we doing about this? Working with estate providers/HMP to develop a curriculum which redirects and adapts learning infrastructure to meet the needs of employers and the emerging post-Brexit, post-Covid job market. We are also increasingly embedding learning delivery in prison industries to increase the variety of vocational skills which can be developed.

Constraint 4: Qualification requirements

Many level 3 vocational qualifications require an individual to be working in real (not simulated) workplaces and in a supervisory position for assessment purposes. This is a significant constraint and practical impediment to delivering level 3 qualifications more extensively in prisons. Some technical and underpinning knowledge can be taught at level 3 but there are significant constraints on achieving a whole host of potentially relevant and popular qualifications.

What are we doing about this? We provide underpinning and technical knowledge components of some level 3 qualifications. We also use peer workers in supervisory positions within workshops/industries, utilise ROTL to enable workplace experience/learning and link to apprenticeships on prison exit. There may be further areas to explore as T Levels are rolled out, which may provide more suitable methods of teaching and assessment than traditional vocational programmes. More could be achieved if prison learning became more closely aligned to the forthcoming Skills and Post 16 Skills and Education Bill.

Constraint 5: Resources

Ultimately each prison has a limited and capped number of required teaching hours and FTE learning places. Demand and need for learning at level 2 and below represents a significant drain

on these resources. Another complicating factor is that level 3 qualifications typically require more teaching hours than those at level 2 or below. In this zero-sum context, significantly increasing level 3 provision would come at the expense of foundational learning for other prisoners.

In a community (e.g. FE) setting, this can be managed more easily due to the additional financial resources that are available. For example:

- the maximum guided learning hours in Further Education is 520 hours per academic year; the maximum funding cap per learner is £4,400.
- A typical prison regime learning length is 1,320 guided learning hours (253% of the FE maximum); a typical learner has support equivalent to c.£650 (14% of the FE maximum per-learner funding cap).

So, within prison, each learner is required to receive substantially more guided learning hours for significantly less investment than available in comparable community and mainstream learning. Comparisons are not straightforward - FE Colleges also have to pay for facilities and learner recruitment, for instance - but the magnitude of difference in investment levels makes these contextual differences relatively minor. Low levels of investment in prison education compared to other educational settings present a significant obstacle to extensively broadening curriculum offers to increase level 3 and above provision.

What are we doing about it? We utilise more efficient means of providing higher-level provision such as distance learning (e.g. Open University/Prisoners' Education Trust) as well as connecting prisoners to FE and apprenticeship provision on release. The overall constraints on regime learning hours are managed by comprehensive initial assessment to ensure all learners have access to relevant and stretching provision.

Question 3: How can the Government ensure that the educational achievements of offenders are recorded as they move across the prison estate, and that they are recognised once released?

The Curious data system does track learner progress and achievement across their prison learning (including across different prisons). The challenge of external recognition of learning achievements has several dimensions in which the Government could assist in securing better outcomes for offenders.

1. **Integration with the National Learner Records System.** This enables a quicker recognition of learning progress and achievements post-release and by community learning partners (e.g. FE/apprenticeships) to understand and build on prior learning.
2. **Decoupling learning achievements from prison markers.** Disclosure of offences and skills capability assessment are distinct elements of the recruitment process. Learning achievements should not be so visibly linked to establishments or specialist offender learning, to enable individuals to be assessed on merit rather than being potentially disadvantaged by their offending past.
3. **Awarding body influence:** Ensure parity of qualifications with different awarding bodies and explore pathways to higher-level qualifications which have the same esteem and rigour as those delivered in the community but enable full delivery in a custodial setting.

4. **Enabling digital “Badges” delivery:** Increasingly recognised by employers, badges quickly confirm a competence and mastery in a subject area and would provide clear evidence of achievement which travels through-the-gate and to job interviews.
5. **Integration with prison and probation systems:** Different digital systems support the case management of prisoner journeys, with Curious covering Education and PNOMIS covering other prisoner support and interventions. There are also different systems operated within probation support programmes. This digital disconnect leads to duplication, double-keying and learner journeys which are less integrated. With the goal of resettlement and employment in mind, the lack of immediate visibility of how one area of support relates to another makes the delivery of more holistic offers tougher. Linking different MOJ systems to allow multi-agency case working would be a significant step forward.

Question 4: How would better data collection on prisoner destination help improve your services?

Fundamentally, better destination data would drive significant service improvement, enabling us to understand conclusively what works best and do more of it. Practically, this would enable us to realise the following benefits:

- **An optimised curriculum:** Being able to track learner journeys inside prison and correlate with destinations after release, as well as other indicators of reduced recidivism such as having a job and stable home, would be a crucial input to our ongoing curriculum improvement activity.
- **Better targeted employer engagement:** Understanding the employers and employment sectors where prison leavers progress to would enable more focused employer engagement, allowing us to direct open-minded and engaged employers to our services.
- **Bring IAG to life:** Enabling teachers, instructors and support staff to talk confidently about actual jobs which previous prisoners have gone on to do would allow them to shatter negative preconceptions that a criminal record will prevent employers from recruiting them.
- **Building better networks and through-the-gate partnerships:** Through knowing the learning destinations of prisoners, inter-agency partnerships can be developed to provide a softer landing point for future prison leavers and ensure learning aims are built on and not replicated.
- **More motivated staff:** Our frontline staff do their job in the hope that they are making a difference to the lives of their learners and the safety and security of society. Better destination data would provide them with empirical validation of their impact and feedback on the specific lives they have helped to turn around.