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# HMP Birmingham

Prison education interim visit report

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**Inspection date(s):** 05-06 January 2021

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## Interim visit

### Context and focus of visit

1. On 17 March 2020, all Ofsted routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out interim visits to prisons and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs). Interim visits aim to help prisoners, parents, employers and government understand how establishments are meeting the education and skills training needs of prisoners during this period, including prisoners with special educational needs and disabilities. They also help to identify what next steps are needed as prisons start to return to full education and skills programmes, taking into account the need to ensure safety throughout. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

### **What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of prisoners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?**

The governor and senior leaders had a clear and ambitious vision for education, skills and work at HMP Birmingham. However, they recognised that the current offer was not meeting the needs of too many prisoners.

Leaders acknowledged that too many prisoners had been unable to engage in purposeful education, skills and work during the pandemic. There were some mitigating reasons for this. However, only the relatively small number of prisoners who were identified as 'essential workers' – such as waste processing, and kitchen workers – have continued to engage in purposeful activity.

Managers were keen to restart face-to-face teaching and training as soon as national restrictions permit it. However, leaders had not yet developed clear restart plans that enabled them to be ready. For example, they had not yet considered possible delivery methods, identified priority groups for reintegration or identified any capacity issues.

Advice and guidance were available to prisoners through an external, regional service. Whilst leaders believed the service was providing help and support to prisoners, they recognised that the service on offer was not as effective as it needed to be. The lack of face-to-face interviews and pre-release support meant that prisoners were not getting the support that they needed.

Managers rightly agreed that the identification of additional learning needs had not always been sufficiently prompt during the pandemic, although this had begun to improve recently. Managers had introduced a small number of support plans that identified appropriate strategies for those who needed them. However, it was not

possible to measure the effectiveness of the support offered to prisoners as there was no formal education offered in the prison.

Tutors stated that they had undertaken a wide range of training in the summer that focused on key aspects of teaching. This had included improved lesson planning and an increased understanding of learning difficulties. In contrast, prison instructors had not undertaken any training or professional development during the pandemic to ensure that their skills were being maintained, mainly as a result of operational demands in other areas of the prison. Managers acknowledged they needed to ensure that enough opportunities were made available to prison instructors to refresh their skills so that they were ready to begin training face-to-face in the workshops before restrictions allow.

The small number of prisoners we spoke with understood the challenges that COVID-19 had posed for education, skills and work in the prison. However, they were unhappy with their current experience. Many prisoners had found the in-cell education packs a frustrating experience, as they believed that they needed more support than they received. Tutors' support was sporadic and prisoners were unaware of any timetabled routine. Prisoners found that they were unable to schedule their learning clearly enough. As a result, they did not feel motivated to do their work.

### **What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of prisoners?**

The curriculum available to prisoners throughout the pandemic had been severely reduced, mostly to English and mathematics. Prisoners had not accessed the vocational workshops since March 2020. No theoretical learning in vocational subjects had been delivered via in-cell education packs.

Managers and staff acknowledged that prisoners' engagement in learning had been low during the pandemic. Tutors recognised that some learners favoured the face-to-face model of learning and that they were not suited to working on in-cell education packs. As a result, they found that some learners had been resistant to undertake learning through this medium.

Despite the efforts of managers, the proportion of prisoners who had completed and returned in-cell education packs was too low. Leaders ensured that in-cell education packs enabled a small number of prisoners to achieve accredited qualifications.

Tutors' assessment of prisoners' work had focused on whether they have completed the work successfully, rather than on assessing the quality of work. Tutors stated that they have received support to improve their practice of assessing work. However, the feedback tutors provided to prisoners was of variable quality and helpfulness. As a result, prisoners were unable to improve the quality of their work over time.

Prisoners did not have access to technology or specialist learning resources to support their learning. For example, there were no technical DVDs or videos, to support them with their vocational training courses. Prisoners who had English as a second language (ESOL) did not have access to resources in their own language to help them make progress in their learning.

Tutors and prison staff had worked collaboratively to design the warehousing packs and choose the learning resources that they had offered to prisoners. Officers worked hard to deliver activity packs to prisoners throughout the pandemic and passed information on the courses available to prisoners. Officers stated there was a positive link between prisoners' engagement and their well-being. Prison staff enjoy their job. They obtained satisfaction from receiving prisoners' feedback.

### **Next steps**

Prison leaders and the education provider must devise a plan that increases the contact between prisoners and tutors to ensure prisoners receive adequate support – particularly those who are not having their learning needs met by in-cell learning packs – and those with additional learning or ESOL needs.

Managers must finalise the de-escalation plan to ensure that there is a smooth return to education, skills and work. They must consider the different delivery methods and an allocation process that matches prisoner priorities to the available opportunities.

Managers should ensure that prison instructors maintain their training and coaching skills through undertaking refresher training and professional development so that they are prepared for the time when face-to-face learning is reinstated.

Managers must support tutors to improve the quality and effectiveness of the feedback prisoners receive when they are submitting their written work.

Technology and specialist learning resources, such as dictionaries and calculators, should be more available to prisoners to help with their learning.

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