

HMP Exeter

Prison education interim visit report

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Interim visit

Ofsted context and focus of visit

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 needs of prisoners during this period, including prisoners with special educational needs and disabilities. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

The visit was conducted by Ofsted alongside HMI Prisons. The visit was conducted fully remotely.

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?

Prison leaders and managers had maintained prisoners' access to an education curriculum since March 2020. The vocational skills and work provision had been much reduced to those areas of work regarded as essential, for example cleaning and putting together breakfast packs or personal protective equipment grab bags. The education courses being offered were non-accredited.

Leaders and managers recognised that there was much work to do to rebuild the provision of education, skills and work to a level that would fully meet the needs of all prisoners. They acknowledged that there was currently a very narrow range of activities on offer. Leaders recognised the need to re-establish appropriate and rigorous oversight of the provision to drive up standards and to ensure they provided an appropriate curriculum.

The management of education, skills and work had been hampered over the past year with significant management changes and vacancies that had proven difficult to fill. The prison had also been categorised as an outbreak site which had resulted in significant levels of staff absence and large numbers of prisoners needing to self-isolate. This had delayed the progress leaders and managers had made with their plans to return to face-to-face teaching.

The provision of industries and work had been greatly affected by the pandemic. Working parties for in-house repairs, recycling and waste management, catering and packaging continued but the number of prisoners involved was very small. However, a greater number of prisoners were engaged in wing work such as cleaning, laundry, and servery work.

Leaders and managers had identified that some prisoners had been more willing to engage with education since the introduction of in-cell packs. They hoped to retain this option beyond the end of the restrictions, for example for those in segregation or on the social care wing.

The very small group of prisoners that we spoke to told us that they enjoyed completing the education packs. They were able to describe the new skills they had developed or revised through the packs. Prisoners with additional learning needs were able to access a laptop computer to help them with their studies. Most prisoners told us that they could get support and feedback from education staff at lunchtimes, through their cell doors. Others expressed frustration and found communication with their teachers difficult. Prisoners stated that not all of them had access to the resources they needed to complete their work packs, for example pencil sharpeners.

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?

Managers and staff had adapted the curriculum so that prisoners completed in-cell education through paper-based work packs. At the start of the pandemic prisoners accessed distraction packs which included activities such as quizzes and crosswords. Education packs followed shortly after which enabled prisoners to complete elements of the curriculum in cell. The curriculum was predominantly English and mathematics but also included courses in, for example, mentoring, customer service, information technology, creative crafts and basic construction. A small number of prisoners took part in distance learning courses such as those available through the Open University.

At the start of the pandemic vocational classroom theory teaching was suspended. As a result, instructors adapted the two-day health and safety course to be more practical and delivered it outside of the classroom. In cleaning, instructors adapted their teaching and assessment to take place on the wing while cleaners carried out their work.

Prisoners' work packs were set out clearly with appropriate tasks designed to check the prisoner's understanding and build on their foundation knowledge. Tutors gave prisoners helpful written feedback on where they needed to improve their answers, although they did not always pick up on spelling, punctuation and grammar errors correctly.

Tutors and instructors felt well supported by the education provider and the prison. For example, they had improved their ways of communicating and working remotely. They attended training on health and safety and well-being. Managers recognised

the need to upskill the newly recruited instructors to give them the appropriate skills to help prisoners develop and record their skills and knowledge in workshops.

Information, advice and guidance services had been reinstated in the last two months. They supported prisoners to develop their curriculum vitae and signposted them to suitable employment opportunities. They supported prisoners through the cell door at lunchtimes to complete self-assessment skills action plans and they were also an integral part of the induction process for all new receptions.

Next steps

Leaders and managers should ensure that all prisoners have access to the essential resources they need to complete their in-cell education packs and that communication between prisoners and teachers is timely and supportive for all prisoners.

Managers must quickly put in place plans to upskill the newly recruited instructors to ensure they are equipped to help prisoners develop their vocational skills.

Leaders and managers should broaden the education, skills and work curriculum to meet the needs of a wider range of prisoners providing them with the skills, knowledge and behaviours they need to progress to their next steps.

Leaders and managers should ensure rigorous oversight of all aspects of education, work and skills in order to monitor and continuously improve the quality of the provision.

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