

# HMP and YOI Thorn Cross

Prison education interim visit report

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**Visit dates:**

20–21 April 2021

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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). The visit was conducted by Ofsted alongside HMI Prisons. The visit was conducted partially remotely.

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. 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 leaders had a focused and ambitious vision for education, skills, and work at the prison. At the time of the visit most prisoners were engaged in education, skills, and work. Prisoners returned to face-to-face teaching, training, and industries from September 2020. In January 2021 a local COVID-19 outbreak forced the prison to go into lockdown for a month. During this period, learners returned to in-cell learning.

Leaders worked flexibly and innovatively throughout the COVID-19 restrictions to maintain a broad education, skills and work curriculum. They introduced new courses to meet changes in the labour market such as the level 3 rail track course which included licence to practice cards. Leaders introduced a community farm shop run by prisoners. They had planned to open a community café offering training and qualification opportunities. However, leaders did not ensure that all the available education and training places were taken up. One-third remained unfilled at the time of the visit.

Leaders supported prisoners throughout the pandemic. They helped learners on Open University courses to stay on track during the initial lockdown when they did not have access to the virtual campus. Library staff printed off information and managers provided learners with laptops so they could type up their assignments. Leaders supported prisoners to access work interviews remotely. Employers interviewed prisoners using online meeting platforms from which they secured work.

Leaders described the challenges they had faced in getting prisoners out to work. They had plans to significantly increase the numbers of prisoners on work

placements in the community by July 2021. Leaders had maintained existing employer links during the COVID-19 restrictions and had developed new ones.

The small sample of learners inspectors spoke with told us they felt well-supported by their teachers. They found teachers to be knowledgeable and experienced. The feedback they received from teachers helped them to develop their knowledge and skills. They were proud of the progress they had made on their courses. Prisoners told us they would like more work placement opportunities. They wanted to practise the skills they had learned on their courses and secure employment on release.

**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?**

Leaders planned a coherent education and training curriculum. They responded quickly to changing circumstances. Leaders increased the range of project work around the prison including decorating, floor screeding and dry lining. Prisoners learned how to work unsupervised and developed work-related attitudes and behaviours. They achieved elements of qualifications through the live projects.

Prisoners had limited access to education, skills and work activities from March to August 2020. Learners on education and training courses completed their workbooks in cells with no feedback or support from teachers. Around half of the learners made slow progress on their course. The other half were released without gaining a qualification. When learners returned to face-to-face practical and theoretical learning teachers supported those who had fallen behind to catch up. During the lockdown in January teachers provided learners with regular feedback on their in-cell work packs.

Leaders supported teachers and instructors to set up safe learning areas for the return to face-to-face teaching. Effective partnership-working across all staff ensured that learners were able to take part in practical activities in the workshops. Prisoners were allocated their own set of tools to prevent cross-contamination.

Teachers planned the curriculum in a logical order so that learners built their knowledge and skills progressively. In brickwork, learners started by building a six-brick pyramid. Next, they constructed a garden wall and chimney breast before progressing onto a windowed gable end. Learners made progress on their courses.

The courses learners were on met their resettlement goals. Staff from the information, advice and guidance delivery partner worked collaboratively with education and prison staff to identify suitable activities within the prison to support prisoners to meet their career goals.

## **Next steps**

Leaders and managers should maximise the take up of allocated places in education and training.

Leaders and managers should increase swiftly the numbers of prisoners on work placements in the community including voluntary and paid work, education and training.

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