

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sport and Physical Activity in the Criminal Justice System launched an independent inquiry in January 2024, examining the role of physical activity, physical education and sport within the children and young people secure estate (CYPSE) and adult prisons across England and Wales. They issued a call for evidence which closed in March 2024. PET responded to the following questions:

Can you provide examples of the types of physical activity, physical education, and sport programmes that are currently available in the CYPSE and adult prisons? Has this changed, and if so, why?

While we recognise that the primary focus of this inquiry will be on in-person access to physical activity, physical education and sport programmes, we would like to draw attention to the opportunities provided by distance learning to access courses that complement these in-person activities. Distance learning enables learners to broaden their knowledge by accessing courses that are otherwise unavailable in prison and to secure qualifications that will help them on release.

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison and uses policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show policymakers and the public the impact that education can have for people in prison. We offer 125 different courses - including courses related to physical education - and enable 1,500 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures.

The accredited fitness courses we provide complement the provision of physical education in the gym. The five courses we currently provide are:

- Adapting Exercise for Ante Natal and Post Natal Clients Level 3
- Adapting Exercise for Independently Active, Older People Level 3
- Business Skills for the Fitness Professional Level 3
- Nutrition to Support Physical Activity Level 3
- Yoga Beginners Level 2

Over the past two years, we have received 307 applications from people in prison to study these courses, of which we were able to fund 169. Of the applicants, 11.7% were women and 86.7% were men (1.6% either preferred to self-describe or preferred not to say).

There has been an increase in the level of demand for PET's courses in recent years; in 2023 PET saw an increase of 14% in demand for our courses.

This may be a result of continuing restrictions in prison regimes, which mean that people are locked in their cells for longer. Even before the Covid lockdown, some prisons had been running restricted regimes. This could mean, for example, that people were unlocked for activities during either the morning or the afternoon but not both; it could also mean wings had access to education on a rota system on different weeks. During Covid-19 significant new restrictions were introduced to protect the health of prisoners and staff. Prisoners frequently spent 23 hours a day or more in their cells and access to education departments was largely non-existent.

However, while nationally mandated restrictions related to Covid-19 were lifted in May 2022, prisons have not yet been able to run full regimes. This has had a significant impact on prison education and on access to facilities such as the gym. This has negative impacts for physical and mental wellbeing. While we recognise the pressure that prisons are under, there should be a focus across the prison system on increasing time out of cell, including on maximising access to education departments and ensuring that people in prison have regular access to gyms and to other opportunities to exercise.

What is the primary objectives of these programmes?

For example, is to improve health and wellbeing, increase education levels, or reduce reoffending etc.

By studying the courses PET offers, people in prison are able to gain accredited fitness qualifications. Enabling people in prison to access relevant education that meets their needs is key to rehabilitation, increasing the likelihood that they will secure employment on release and reducing the chance that they will reoffend.

We also know studying helps people whilst still in prison. Not only does it help improve mental health and wellbeing, but of learners supported by PET:

- 65% have gone on to further studies.
- 34% have applied for a job in prison.
- 52% have taken up a volunteering role, including supporting others with their learning.*

*(*These statistics are for learners who studied during 2022. Many people supported by PET during 2023 are still studying.)*

What evidence, data, and research is available to demonstrate the effect of physical activity, physical education and sport on rehabilitation and the reduction of reoffending rates?

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the benefits of prison education, particularly in relation to its impact on reoffending and employment post-release. Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to study distance learning courses in prison are more likely to get a job after release and less likely to reoffend (<https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/01/government-research-impact-of-prison-education-goes-beyond-finding-work/>). Looking at prison education more broadly, research by the Ministry of Justice has showed that participating in prison education reduces reoffending and increases the chances of securing employment on release (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf). These findings are reinforced by the most comprehensive international study, published by the RAND Corporation, which found that prison education reduces the risk of reoffending by 13% (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html).

Can you provide a case study, or a success story to illustrate how sport and physical activity have contributed to reducing reoffending rates, including any relevant data or evidence?

'Rahima' completed a PET funded course in Nutrition for Physical Activity. She decided to work towards becoming a Personal Trainer after enjoying her job in the prison's gym. Before starting her course, Rahima wrote: "I have found my passion in life - the health and fitness industry. It is something I strive to excel in, apply to myself, better myself and

utilise to better the lives of those around me.” One of her goals was to make her family proud but she also wants to start her own business providing services around life coaching, personal training and nutritional advice.

During her studies, Rahima received support from the prison wing distance learning group, a staff member, and other PET learners. She added that PET’s advice letter and the instructions that arrived with her distance learning materials “helped me by outlining the course, which in turn helped me break it down and organise my studies a lot better.”

Having completed her course, Rahima reported to PET that she felt able to change her life and do something positive after release, as well as able to cope with being in prison in a positive way. She noted in an end of course monitoring form that “the Nutrition course helped by equipping me with the knowledge I now pass on to other prisoners through my role as a gym assistant.” She added “Coming from a financially disadvantaged background and all around lack of opportunity and choices in life growing up, PET has been a golden ticket of opportunities which has given me a second life. For this I am exceptionally grateful for such a service and trust.”

What are the main challenges and limitations faced by programmes delivering physical activity and sport in the CYPSE and prisons?

Prison overcrowding creates significant problems for the delivery of fitness related prison education and access to facilities such as the gym. Firstly, with prisons holding more people than they were designed for, education departments, gyms and other sports facilities are unlikely to have the capacity needed. If prisons are going to be expected to hold more people on an ongoing basis, then prison education departments and other facilities such as the gym need to be expanded accordingly.

Furthermore, the lack of headroom in the prison estate, and the need to manage population pressures, increases the risk that people will need to be moved around the prison estate, often at short notice. These decisions do not usually take into account their educational needs or their participation in a course. This is particularly problematic when a learner is part-way through a course that is not offered at the receiving prison. Starting a course and then not being able to complete it can be particularly disheartening for learners and make it less likely that they will want to participate in education in the future.

PET provides access to distance learning for people in prison. With people spending more time in their cells now than used to be the case pre-Covid, this can be an effective way for people in prison to access education. But if cells designed for one person actually hold two people, it can be difficult for learners to find a quiet, suitable place to study. This will have an impact on their ability to progress with and complete courses, gaining the skills and qualifications that they need to secure employment on release.

The state of the prison estate is also a significant barrier to providing good quality education. This was noted by the Education Select Committee in the report of its recent prison education inquiry, which stated that “without significant investment in the prison estate, in buildings, classrooms, equipment and technology, prisoners will not be able to get the skills and qualification that they need to find employment to turn their lives around”.

A further issue is the lack of access to laptops or other digital devices and the internet within prison and the problems that this creates for education provision. While some progress has been made (with some in-cell provision, including offline laptops provided by

Coracle Inside), there is still a long way to go to meet the Ministry of Justice's aim, set out in the 2021 'Prisons Strategy White Paper', for the prison system to be "digitally enabled for prisoners and staff, by default".

The lack of access to digital devices and the internet means that people in prison do not have access to the vast array of educational and other digital resources that are freely available in the community. It also presents challenges for the provision of distance learning. While PET continues to provide paper-based courses for people in prison, distance learning in the community is now largely provided online and similar access will be needed to ensure that people in prison can access the widest range of high-quality courses in the future.

How do resources, e.g. staffing, and facility constraints etc. impact the delivery and effectiveness of these programmes?

Classrooms and other education facilities are too often in an unacceptable state, limiting access to education and creating an unsuitable environment for people to teach and learn in. This was reflected in evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee, with one submission by prison teachers describing "rotting walls and doors, mould, leaking roofs requiring buckets, [and a] lack of adequate heating". Moreover the layout of some prisons - with, for example, education departments only accessible from one wing or only via stairs - is not conducive to making education available to everyone.

Shortages of officers means that people in prison cannot always be escorted safely around the prison or moved from their wing to their allocated activity. Given that the delivery of the majority of prison education and training depends on access to classrooms and workshops, if people in prison cannot get to them then activities cannot go ahead. Even when people in prison can get to classrooms, staff shortages may lead to them arriving late or needing to return to their wing early. This disrupts the planned lessons and puts more pressure on prison teachers. Staff shortages can also affect prison gyms, which can be closed with little or no notice because there are no staff to oversee access.

What opportunities exist for improving both access and the quality of physical activity, physical education and sport programmes within the CYPSE and prisons?

Opportunities for improving access to fitness related distance learning include:

- **Increasing officer recruitment and retention** and improving the training that all officers receive on prison education so prisons can move towards running a full regime. This will enable prisoners more consistent access to education departments and other facilities such as the gym, and allow prison officers enough time to work with individual prisoners and use their skills and knowledge to support them to participate in education.
- **Ensuring a clear strategy is put in place to increase access to digital devices to support learning.** Addressing the lack of access to digital devices and the internet is essential to ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is routinely available to learners in the community. In-cell digital technology and safe and secure access to the internet should become standard. While this may take time to implement across the whole prison estate, a clear strategy and timeline is needed as to how this will be achieved. This will help to ensure that consistent progress is made.