

In May 2024 PET submitted a response to Ofsted's 'Big Listen' consultation. Submissions were required via an online form. PET's response is reproduced here but in a different format to that submitted.

1) About Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) is an independent charity that offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison across England and Wales. We offer 130 different courses - including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses - and enable 1,400 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures. PET also uses research, policy and advocacy work to identify and promote ways to improve prison education and show policymakers and the public the impact that education can have for people in prison.

2) Response to the Big Listen

PET welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. PET's interest in Ofsted is in its work inspecting education provision in prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs). We would like to highlight the importance of this work in assessing the current quality of education provision in custodial establishments and providing the foundations for future improvements. As prisons and young offender institutions are not given as a specific category, we have submitted our response in the 'further education and skills' section.

a. Reporting

Ofsted reports are the only independent, robust and publicly accessible source of information on the quality of education provision in custodial establishments. As a result, Ofsted's work in this area is extremely important. Inspection reports provide an authoritative assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a prison's or YOI's education provision. They also provide prisons, YOIs and contracted education providers with recommendations on how they can improve. At a time when the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) are rightly committed to improving the quality of education in prisons and YOIs, this is invaluable.

Given the importance of Ofsted's reports, learners should be informed about the findings of inspections. But many of the normal routes that Ofsted uses to communicate with stakeholders (for example via email and online) may not be accessible to learners who are in custody. We would therefore encourage Ofsted to consider - working with HM Inspectorate of Prisons - how the findings of their inspections can be fed back to learners in custody, to help learners to understand what the inspections have found and (following independent reviews of progress) what has changed as a result.

Linked to this, we encourage Ofsted to use the term 'learner' instead of 'prisoner' in their reports (and in their inspection handbook) when referring to people in prison who are

engaged in education, skills and work. This is the term most often used by those engaged in prison education. Ofsted rightly seeks to hold prisons to the same standard of performance as further education providers. We believe that using ‘learner’ instead of ‘prisoner’ - recognising that learners are learners, wherever they access education - would better reflect this commitment to ensuring parity with education in the community.

b. Inspection practice

At a time when the prison system is under considerable pressure, inspections use up limited staff time and resource. This is inevitable and unavoidable, but Ofsted should be aware of the pressures that staff are under when conducting inspections. Ofsted should continue to work closely with HM Inspectorate of Prisons to make sure that staff time is used effectively. Broader Ofsted work to ensure that inspections foster a respectful and sensitive environment for all participants should also inform inspections of prisons and YOIs. As part of this, Ofsted should take into account that staff in custodial establishments may be less familiar with Ofsted and its work than staff in other educational environments.

As discussed below, we welcome Ofsted’s recent focus on the teaching of reading. We therefore welcome the changes made to the inspection handbook in October 2022 to make reading a higher priority.

Finally, we believe that learner voice is key in determining the quality of education in prisons and YOIs. We strongly support Ofsted’s work to ensure that interviews and discussions are held with learners as part of the inspection process. Ofsted should look to build on this, including considering what role people with lived experience of prison education could play in inspection teams.

c. Impact

Given the importance of Ofsted’s work, and the urgent need to improve prison education, we would encourage Ofsted to work with HMPPS to discuss how more could be done to ensure that the recommendations of inspections are implemented. In the eight reports of independent reviews of progress published in 2024 so far, for example, Ofsted has assessed the progress made on 27 themes. Of these, ‘Insufficient progress’ had been made on 13, ‘Reasonable progress’ had been made on 13, and ‘Significant progress’ had been made on just one. While we recognise that the prison system is currently under significant pressure, Ofsted may want to consider whether they could contribute to work to ensure that prisons are able to make improvements based on the findings of Ofsted’s inspections. In particular, the creation of the new Head of Education, Skills and Work role may create opportunities for there to be a greater focus, post inspection, on responding to Ofsted’s findings.

d. Culture and purpose

Alongside their role assessing the current quality of education provision in custodial establishments, we support them having a broader role in supporting improvement. We therefore encourage Ofsted to continue its broader work with custodial establishments and with HMPPS as a whole, taking a collaborative approach to improving education in prisons and YOIs. In particular, we think that the following are important elements of Ofsted’s work in this area:

- In depth reviews: Ofsted's in-depth review of reading education in prisons (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons>), carried out with HM Inspectorate of Prisons as part of a year-long focus on prison education, has provided a real focus on this issue within prisons and, while there is still more work to be done, has secured improvements. In our view, this model - with Ofsted complementing its routine inspection programme with deep dives into specific issues - has significant benefits and Ofsted should consider how it can add value in this way in the future. This should include periodically following up on progress on its past work on reading and on education for people in prison with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It should also include considering what other issues, identified through its inspection work, would benefit from an in-depth review of this kind focused on how improvements can be secured. This should include looking at provision in YOIs.
- Work with prison leaders: Ofsted has been providing education sessions to prison leaders to increase understanding of Ofsted's expectations and how they can be met. This is wholly welcome and should continue, as part of a dialogue between prison leaders - including governors and the new Heads of Education, Skills and Work - on the provision of education in prisons and how it can be improved. This should help prison leaders to understand what good quality provision looks like from an Ofsted perspective, but also help Ofsted to understand some of the challenges that prisons face in delivering education.

Building on these points, Ofsted should consider how it can best play a broader role in supporting improvements in education in prisons and YOIs. Ofsted's expertise in education delivery - both in the custodial context, given the knowledge gleaned from inspections, and more broadly - can be invaluable in discussions about how improvements can be secured. Ofsted should therefore be open to being part of discussions between HMPPS, individual prisons and YOIs and education providers on improving delivery. Our experience is that this is currently the case, with welcome engagement by Ofsted staff with us and with the sector, and we hope that this will continue.

3) *Conclusions*

Ofsted has a vital role to play in improving the quality of education provision in prisons and YOIs. The inspection regime is invaluable in providing an independent measure of quality. We also welcome the broader work that Ofsted has done in recent years on prison education, looking to secure improvements in this important area. We hope that as Ofsted identifies priorities going forward, it will continue to prioritise education in prisons and YOIs in its future work.