

# **Prisoners' Education Trust — written evidence (PRI0033)**

## **Summary of key points**

This response from Prisoners' Education Trust considers culture through an education lens and focuses on the how governance, leadership and staffing can create a culture of learning.

### **The role of a prison governor**

- Governors are critical to setting the 'tone' of a prison and, though they do not control all education delivery in their establishments, they can create a culture with education at its core. (3.1)
- To achieve this, governors should make a clear and explicit effort to understand the education needs of those in their prison and whether the current education offer in and beyond the prison education department is meeting these. (3.8)

### **HMPPS**

- The prison service definition should be more explicit in the role the prison service plays in rehabilitation and enabling educational and employment opportunities. (4.3)
- The public do not understand the role prisons could play in rehabilitation (4.4) and ministers, those working in the sector and those with lived experience of prison can all play a role in addressing this. (4.5)

### **Recruitment, training and retention**

- Prison officers can play a hugely important role in encouraging people to engage with education. Addressing the staffing issues in prisons and providing additional training for new officers would help to address this. (5.2 – 5.4)

### **The perspective of prisoners**

- People in prison understand the role the governor plays in shaping the regime and whether access to education is prioritised. (6.1) They respect governors who are visible across the prison and who spend time in the education department. (6.2)
- Relations between people living and working in prison are fundamental to an effective regime. Positive relations can create an environment where people in prison are willing to make the most of opportunities provided. (6.5)
- Many factors contribute to the culture of a prison: the governor and leadership team; staff and officers; people in prison; prison category, population size and the regime; and architecture, facilities and green spaces. (6.6 – 6.18) These should be considered collectively and not in isolation.
- A badly run prison means people will not benefit from education and a positive learning culture. This will have a negative impact both in prison and on long term rehabilitative outcomes on release. (6.20)

### **Conclusion**

- A well-run prison with a culture of learning will result in positive engagement with the regime whilst in prison, as well as good outcomes for learners, and the communities they will return to, on release. (7.1)

## **1. About Prisoners' Education Trust (PET)**

- 1.1 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 1,500 people each year to access distance learning, giving them the skills to build brighter futures.
- 1.2 Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to access distance learning courses in prison are more likely to get a job within one year of release and are less likely to reoffend within one year of release than otherwise similar people in prison who PET does not support.
- 1.3 PET also 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.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 PET welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. Enabling people in prison to access education that meets their needs is key to rehabilitation. Our evidence considers culture through an education lens and focuses on the how governance, leadership and staffing can create a culture of learning.
- 2.2 We know from the prison education theory of change<sup>1</sup> the impact that education can have on culture in a prison. The theory of change shows "the ability of education to change that culture by creating positive networks of learners promoting education and supporting others. Learners, peer mentors and staff gradually influence others and the prison culture through a 'ripple effect'."

## **Response to the inquiry's Terms of Reference**

### **3. The role of a prison governor**

#### ***What is the role of a prison governor and how has it changed in recent years?***

- 3.1 Governors set the 'tone' of a prison – their values and how they treat both staff and the people in their care have an impact on how those living and working in the establishment perceive and engage with the regime. In a thematic report on improving behaviour in prisons published last year, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) wrote "Leadership was critical to determining the culture of the prison and the extent to which it motivated prisoners."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Theory-of-Change-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris\\_reports/improving-behaviour-in-prisons-a-thematic-review/](https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/improving-behaviour-in-prisons-a-thematic-review/), p. 7.

- 3.2 This extends to education provision. Where governors recognise the value of education, they can play a fundamental role in creating a culture of learning. This is regularly evidenced by prison inspection reports. During 2023 and 2024, in reports where Ofsted assessed leadership and management as 'good', the overall effectiveness of education was also always assessed to be 'good'.
- 3.3 In recent years Heads of Education, Skills and Work have been introduced into prisons. These are senior roles with a focus on education. It is essential that governors provide these roles with support and integrate them fully into their senior leadership teams.

***Do governors have enough autonomy?***

- 3.4 Whilst every prison works to the same orders and guidance they can be very different depending on factors such as population and location. To be effective, governors need to be able to respond to those differences, particularly if prisons are to tailor education provision to different needs. During the pandemic, the centre drew more powers to itself. This was understandable but those powers have been slow to return to governors. It is important to address security and safety issues but in some establishments this is to the exclusion of education and purposeful activity.
- 3.5 Prison governors have limited control over the education provision in their establishment. Prison education in public sector prisons in England primarily focuses on literacy, numeracy and vocational skills up to Level 2. This is delivered by specialist providers, through contracts with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and governors do not have a say in who secures those contracts and only have limited influence over how they are delivered. Prison governors do have some funding available to bring in additional provision via the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS). This is used for a wide range of educational activities, including sport, art activities and peer reading schemes.

***What are the qualities needed to be a successful governor? How can governors be held responsible for poor performance?***

- 3.6 There are a range of qualities which help a governor to be successful, especially when fostering a culture of learning and education. They should have an interest in people and their potential, with clarity of thinking around rehabilitation and what it means for those in their establishment. They should have a belief in the value of education which they share with their leadership team, and an understanding that education encompasses a wide range of levels and types of learning.
- 3.7 Governors should develop good relationships across the prison, with staff at all grades and across different departments. They should be visible across their establishment including in the education department. This is particularly important in ensuring the education department isn't siloed, feels valued and is seen as an integral part of the prison.

- 3.8 Governors should make a clear and explicit effort to understand the education needs of those in their prison and whether the current education offer in and beyond the education department is meeting these. Where they cannot use the DPS to bolster provision, they should be willing to encourage and facilitate voluntary sector organisations that have external funding to deliver education and learning related projects in prisons.
- 3.9 All this should be underpinned by the qualities which make a good leader, for example integrity, vision, resilience and compassion.
- 3.10 The length of time a governor is in post impacts how successful they can be. To have a meaningful impact on rehabilitation takes time. Work should be done to develop the talent pool of potential governors with improved succession planning, so prisons benefit from good quality leadership which isn't lost when a governor moves on.
- 3.11 Drawing on the above, HMPPS should develop a clear definition of what success looks like for a governor. This is particularly important in setting expectations relating to rehabilitation, education and learning. Having clarity around the definition of success also helps to measure poor performance.

#### **4. HMPPS**

##### ***Does HMPPS have a defining mission? What should its mission be?***

- 4.1 HMPPS states "We carry out sentences given by the courts, in custody and the community, and rehabilitate people in our care through education and employment."<sup>3</sup>
- 4.2 HM Prison Service states "We keep those sentenced to prison in custody, helping them lead law-abiding and useful lives, both while they are in prison and after they are released."<sup>4</sup>
- 4.3 Whilst education features in the broader HMPPS service definition, it is not specifically referenced in the description of the prison service. The prison service description should be far more explicit in the role the prison service plays in rehabilitation and enabling educational and employment opportunities.

##### ***How does the public see the role of the prison service and how can any misconceptions be addressed?***

- 4.4 Prisons are very misunderstood and unfamiliar places to the majority of the public. They see prisons as playing a public protection role rather than key to rehabilitation. In a recent survey of public knowledge and attitudes to prison by the Sentencing Academy<sup>5</sup>, the most important

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-and-probation-service/about>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-service/about>

purpose of imprisonment, chosen by 42% of respondents, was protecting the public by removing people who had committed crimes from society. Rehabilitation was the next most chosen purpose, attracting 19% of respondents. 73% of respondents considered prisons to be either 'not at all' or 'not very' effective at rehabilitating offenders and preventing re-offending.

- 4.5 To address misconceptions, ministers should be clearer on the rehabilitative purposes of prison and promote education as a priority for every prison. People with lived experience of prison education should have opportunities to speak for themselves and share their experiences and successes. Those working in the sector should talk more about the positive impact of engaging in education and learning in prison, and the robust and extensive evidence that shows that participating in education while in prison reduces reoffending and increases the chance of securing employment on release.

## **5. Recruitment, training and retention**

### ***What is the role of a prison officer?***

- 5.1 It is a much misunderstood and undervalued role. Though officers are there to keep people safe, people in prison rely on officers for things which they are simply unable to do for themselves. This ranges from physical access to the prison education department to helping send assignments for distance learning courses. Prison officers need to have empathy and can be critical in resolving the practical issues which impact the educational experience of people in prison.
- 5.2 Current shortages of prison officers in some prisons therefore have a significant impact on education delivery. Where there are insufficient officers, people cannot always be escorted safely around the prison. Given that the delivery of most education and training depends on access to classrooms and workshops, if learners cannot get to them then activities cannot go ahead. Officer shortages may also lead to learners arriving late or being returned to their wing early. This disrupts the planned lessons, increasing pressure on prison teachers.
- 5.3 Insufficient staffing levels also mean that officers have less time to spend with people one-to-one. This has an impact on education. If they have the time to do so, prison officers can encourage people to engage with education, help them to recognise it as a way to use their time in prison productively and achieve their goals, and even support them as learners. Current understaffing makes this extremely difficult for officers to do.
- 5.4 As well as capacity, buy-in from officers is also key to delivering high quality education in prison. An understanding of the importance of education, and what prison officers can do to support prisoners to engage in education, should be a core part of the training that all new

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sentencingacademy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Who-is-in-Prison-and-What-is-the-Purpose-of-Imprisonment.pdf>

prison officers complete. This was recognised by the Education Select Committee in the report of their inquiry on prison education, which stated that “prison officers should also receive training to ensure that they understand the importance of education in supporting prisoners to find employment and reducing reoffending, so they develop a positive attitude towards the role that education has to play in prisons”.<sup>6</sup> We welcomed the fact that the Government accepted this recommendation; this should continue to be a priority in training for new officers and CPD for the existing workforce.

## **6. The perspective of prisoners**

### ***How do prisoners understand the role of the governor?***

- 6.1 While people in prison will often have misconceptions about prison governors, they understand that governors shape the regime, and governor commitment to and visibility in prison education is important. One prison learner told us that “you get to know [a governor] through the regime...it goes quicker when you’re kept busy with work, education and activities. How the prison is run shows what the leadership team and governor are like.” Another said governors determine “how effective the regime is, whether you feel safe and whether you’re encouraged to go to education.”

### ***How often do they see the governor and what impact does governor visibility have?***

- 6.2 In some prisons, people see governors as remote. They only have contact with a governor in a negative context, for example when discipline is applied or when a complaint is made. This means a governor is often feared or seen as elusive. People have the most respect for governors who engage and speak with them directly. They appreciate governors who are visible and walk the prison (including the education department) on a regular basis, making themselves known. It is also important for prison staff to see that the governor knows and understands the prison and what is going on across their establishment. Governors spending time in education departments shows that they see education as a key part of the regime and helps to reduce siloing.

### ***What makes a “good” prison officer from the perspective of prisoners?***

- 6.3 A good prison officer is someone who engages with people in prison in a compassionate and professional manner. They are empathetic and communicate well. They understand and value the importance of education and learning, and where possible encourage people to engage in activities which support personal development. They also encourage people in prison to develop positive and meaningful relationships in prison and outside. Education can play an important role in this, bringing learners together inside, or connecting people to family members outside.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/28707/documents/173902/default/>, p. 13.

- 6.4 There are also aspects to consider before recruitment to ensure a good appointment. This includes a focus on culture and values in the recruitment process and having a clear definition for the role which balances rehabilitation with safety and security. Officers should have a range of backgrounds, educational levels and experiences to be able to relate to learners at different levels in prison.

***How do relations between prisoners and staff affect the experience of those in the prison system (staff and prisoners)?***

- 6.5 Relations between people living and working in prison are fundamental to an effective regime. The impact can be seen routinely in prison inspections. A recent good example is the inspection at Rye Hill where inspectors reported "Staff and prisoner relationships were excellent. Well led and confident staff were visible on the wings and had the confidence and time to help prisoners with their requests."<sup>7</sup> This approach takes commitment. Discontent has the potential to create a volatile space for all and reduces the likelihood of people engaging positively with education and other purposeful activity. Positive relationships can be transformative; they can create an environment where people in prison are willing to make the most of opportunities given and are supported to do so.

***What factors contribute to the "culture" of a prison?***

- 6.6 There are many factors which contribute to the culture of a prison. Though some of the factors listed below are not specific to education, they can all contribute to a positive culture which fosters a commitment to learning.
- 6.7 **The Governor and leadership team:** In addition to the qualities of a successful governor (paragraphs 3.6 – 3.11), there are broader senior leadership considerations which can embed education in prison culture:
- Whether the leadership team meaningfully involve people in prison e.g. through councils, community charters (agreed standards which staff and people in prison adhere to), or mentoring. These can influence the education provision and create a learning environment. We know, for example, that 57% of PET learners in 2023 went on to volunteer in prison including as peer mentors, and 233 PET learners in 2024 studied counselling, teaching or mentoring related distance learning courses. However it is important that the leadership team "recognises the particular challenges inherent in managing such a role [of mentor] whilst also holding the status of 'prisoner'."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/11/Rye-Hill-web-2024.pdf>

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[https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33554254/Amended\\_MJB\\_An\\_Exploration\\_of\\_a\\_Prison\\_Based\\_Learning\\_Culture.pdf](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/33554254/Amended_MJB_An_Exploration_of_a_Prison_Based_Learning_Culture.pdf), p. 275.

- How much good practice is encouraged and shared between staff, departments and other establishments. This is essential to ensure education and learning activities across the prison are not siloed.
- How they create an environment which enables prison education staff and officers to try different approaches relevant to their population.
- To what degree mental health and wellbeing are a focus for both the staff and people in their establishment. Participating in education helps to boost the mental health and wellbeing of people in prison by helping them to occupy their time positively and learn new skills. With people spending more time in their cells than ever before, distance learning courses can provide them with something to focus on and a positive way to spend their time. As one learner told us, “[my course has] given me confidence to know I have a future. It has helped me with my mental health and ultimately made me feel more human”.

- 6.8 **Staff and officers:** As well as the aspects key to a good prison officer (paragraphs 6.3 – 6.4), it is important that staff feel safe, both physically and psychologically. The former is obviously important in a prison setting, but the latter is also critical in creating a culture where people are safe to speak up with “ideas, questions, concerns and even mistakes”.<sup>9</sup> If staff do not feel safe and confident in their role, they won’t be able to move beyond security and safety, and opportunities to support people in prison with their educational needs will be lost.
- 6.9 **People in prison:** To engage positively with education in prison, people in prison need to have their basic needs met (e.g. access to bedding and showers, medication, clean cells, appropriate furniture). As with prison staff, it is important that people in prison feel safe both physically and psychologically. Without this it is impossible to think longer term and consider what education or training they should explore for release.
- 6.10 Provision of nutritious food is also important. Current and former learners have repeatedly told us that the quantity and quality of prison food is a significant barrier to learning for people in prison. Put simply, people who are hungry do not learn well; access to insufficient amounts of poor-quality food leaves people feeling listless and lacking in energy and focus. Problems with prison food have been recognised by HMIP, which has said that “too often the quantity and quality of the food provided is insufficient”.<sup>10</sup>
- 6.11 The prison regime needs to support and encourage educational progression. This includes better tracking of attainment and progression, and more consideration as to the impact that regime changes or prison transfers can have. It is also important that learners are encouraged to and able to build supportive relationships with other in prison and have contact with family or support networks on the outside. In 2023, 36% of PET learners identified making their family proud as a key motivating factor in their learning.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eP6guvRt0U0>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/09/Life-in-prison-Food-Web-2016.pdf>, p. 13.

- 6.12 **Prison category, population size and the regime:** These all impact the culture of the prison. Adequate accommodation is critical. It is not necessarily the case that small prisons foster a better culture; if the accommodation and facilities (more below) are adequate, it is possible to build a learning culture in any size prison.
- 6.13 The regime should also provide meaningful opportunities for education and training which are available to all. What activities are available and how broad the definition of education and learning is can all build confidence and ensure learning is embedded across the prison. It is also important to consider the pay for participation in education. It should be at least equal to the highest-paid work within the prison. This demonstrates a commitment to education and contributes to a culture which centres education.
- 6.14 Finally there should also be effective use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). ROTL can play a hugely important role in accessing education and employment opportunities in the community and in helping to prepare for release.
- 6.15 **Architecture, facilities and green spaces:** Good architecture can help create a rehabilitative culture. Good access to the library, good lighting, and spaces to study are all conducive to creating a learning environment. It is also important to remember the needs of those working in prison. To support those in their care well, prison and education staff need the right facilities, rooms and equipment. A recent Ministry of Justice research report into HMP Five Wells<sup>11</sup>, a new prison opened in 2022, reflected that architecture intended to encourage rehabilitation had not taken into account the needs of prison staff. "Many staff felt that Five Wells had been built to enhance the prisoner experience, but their own needs had been forgotten."
- 6.16 Maintenance of buildings is also important. Living and working in buildings which are in a poor state of repair, and only being able to access equipment which is broken or obsolete, causes friction, stress and upset for people in prison. One individual at Foston Hall described their prison education department as having "...mould and mushrooms growing out of the walls here, and rainwater pouring down the walls into electrical sockets. The roof is on the brink of collapse due to pressure of leaks."<sup>12</sup> Though prisons face limited budgets, there are still positive choices which can be made. The HMIP Annual Report highlighted improvements at Swansea and Leeds where leaders "had managed to make the best of their ageing buildings by prioritising decency and ongoing maintenance."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67448e1081f809b32c856925/five-wells-report.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://insidetime.org/mailbag/education-system-is-not-working/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/09/25.13\\_HMI-Prisons\\_AR-23-24\\_v6a\\_Final-WEB.pdf](https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/09/25.13_HMI-Prisons_AR-23-24_v6a_Final-WEB.pdf) p. 27.

- 6.17 The range and quality of facilities available can very much affect the culture of prison. The lack of access to digital devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) and the internet in most prisons is a barrier to effective education provision. Without access to digital devices, people in prison cannot develop the digital skills that are now essential for life outside prison and do not have access to the vast array of digital educational resources that are 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. Access to the internet is therefore essential in ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is available in the community.
- 6.18 Finally, access to green space is important. Prisons with more green spaces within their walls are shown to exhibit lower levels of prisoner self-harm, lower levels of violence between prisoners and violence against staff, and lower levels of staff sickness.<sup>14</sup> This all helps people in prison to engage with the regime more positively and be in a better position to take up educational opportunities.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/7486/pdf>

### ***How are prisoners affected when a prison is badly run?***

- 6.19 People in prison and staff are both negatively affected when a prison is badly run. People in prison suffer as the opportunities available to them are likely to be more limited. Increased time locked in cells leads to an increase in frustration for people when in cell and feeling less safe when unlocked. Levels of stress and noise increase, and there is a deterioration of mental and physical health, impacting people's ability to engage positive with the regime. Staff can feel disillusioned, demoralised and frustrated.
- 6.20 As discussed above, access to education in prison – and engagement with it – is key in supporting engagement with the regime and reducing reoffending on release. But in a poorly run prison, people are less likely to be able to access education, more likely to have to study in a poor quality environment, and less likely to get the support of officers or benefit from a positive learning culture. This will have a negative impact on them, both when serving their sentence and on release.

### **Conclusion**

- 7.1 As we have outlined, many factors contribute to the culture of a prison. It is important that these factors are looked at collectively and not in isolation. Well run prisons with committed leadership and staff are critical, but they must also recognise the importance of education and the role it plays in rehabilitation. In doing so, and by creating time and positive spaces for learning, engagement with education will increase. This not only means positive engagement with the regime whilst in prison, but importantly good outcomes for learners, and the communities they will return to, on release.

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