

## Written evidence submitted by Prisoners' Education Trust

### Summary of key points

This submission from Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) focuses on the following key points:

- Prison education is a key part of the further education landscape but is too often not included in debates about further education and frequently operates in a silo.
- Despite its importance in supporting rehabilitation, the quality of education in prison is poor. Ofsted consistently finds that it is the poorest performing sector that it inspects.
- There are challenges with the curriculum, with facilities, and with recruiting and retaining teachers. Underfunding drives or contributes to many of these issues.
- There are areas of good practice, including local partnerships with further education providers, that can form the basis for broader improvement.
- People in and leaving prison are among the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the country. Improving the quality and availability of prison education would help them to improve their life chances on release.
- Prison education can transform lives. There should be a real and ongoing focus on improving it, which should include better integrating it into community-based further education provision.

### 1) About Prisoners' Education Trust

- 1.1 Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) provides distance learning courses and related advice and guidance to people in prison across England and Wales. We offer 130 different courses - including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University (OU) Access modules and a wide range of professional courses - and enable 1,500 people each year to access distance learning.
- 1.2 Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab shows that people supported by PET to access distance learning in prison are more likely to get a job and less likely to reoffend within one year of release than otherwise similar people who PET does not support.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3 PET also uses policy, research 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. The provision of education to people in prison is a little understood part of the further education landscape. Yet enabling people in prison to access education that meets their needs is key to rehabilitation. Extensive and robust evidence shows that participating in education in prison improves the chance of securing employment on release and reduces reoffending. Our submission focuses on the provision of further education to people in prison and how it could be improved.
- 2.2 During the previous parliament, the Education Select Committee held an inquiry looking specifically at prison education.<sup>2</sup> This was a welcome intervention that helped to highlight the issues facing prison education provision and what could be

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/01/government-research-impact-of-prison-education-goes-beyond-finding-work/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/817/prison-education/>

done to address them. We would encourage the Committee to maintain an interest in this issue, both through this inquiry and in its broader work programme in the coming years.

### 3) Response to the inquiry's Call for Evidence

#### *Curriculum and qualifications in further education*

##### ***Driving better standards in further education; the quality and consistency of provision and outcomes***

- 3.1 Recognising low levels of literacy and numeracy among people in prison,<sup>3</sup> the core education provision in prisons in England and Wales focuses on literacy and numeracy up to Level 2, along with Information and Communications Technology, English for Speakers of Other Languages and vocational training. In English public sector prisons this is delivered by independent providers under contract with the Ministry of Justice. Arrangements in private prisons and prisons in Wales differ but the focus of the core provision is broadly similar.
- 3.2 To complement the core provision, prison governors can also buy in additional educational activities using a commissioning mechanism known as the Dynamic Purchasing System. This may include, for example, sport, art activities and peer reading schemes. Other organisations provide educational activities without being funded. In addition, some businesses work within prisons to provide vocational training. All people in prison should have access to a library, although in practice access varies significantly.
- 3.3 To provide a broader range of opportunities to learners, PET provides access to distance learning courses on a wide variety of subjects - including GCSEs and A-Levels, and a range of professional courses - purchasing courses on behalf of learners from specialist course providers. We fund this through a combination of a grant from the Ministry of Justice, charitable funding we raise independently, and a contribution from the prison. These courses are free to the learner. People can also access higher education (primarily from the OU), funded through a student loan.
- 3.4 In 2016, responsibility for the budget for commissioning most prison education in England moved from the Department of Education to the Ministry of Justice. As a result, it is the Ministry of Justice that is responsible for most of the issues that are raised in this submission, rather than the Department of Education.
- 3.5 The primary measure of quality in prison education is Ofsted judgements. As set out in Figure 1, during 2023-24 the education provision at 54% of the prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) inspected was judged to be "inadequate", while 33% were judged to be "requires improvement". Only 13% (five prisons) were "good" and none were "outstanding". No prison has been judged outstanding in more than five years. This would be unthinkable and unacceptable in any other sector. As at 31 August 2024, 82% of further education and skills providers were judged good (72%) or outstanding (10%) for overall effectiveness at their most recent inspection, compared to 18% of prisons and YOIs.

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<sup>3</sup> People who arrive in public sector prisons in England complete an initial assessment to determine their levels of English and Maths. In 2023-24 the [results](#) of the majority of initial assessments - 73% of Maths assessments and 71% of English assessments - were at Entry Level 3 or below. More than one in five (21%) - nearly 9,500 people - were at Entry Level 1 for English.

**Figure 1: Ofsted prison education inspection outcomes, 2015-16 to 2023-24**

	Total number of prisons/YOs inspected	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate
2023-24	39	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	13 (33%)	21 (54%)
2022-23	43	0 (0%)	4 (9%)	20 (47%)	19 (44%)
2021-22	22	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	10 (45%)	11 (50%)
2019-20	32	0 (0%)	9 (28%)	19 (59%)	4 (13%)
2018-19	45	1 (2%)	17 (38%)	20 (44%)	7 (16%)
2017-18	41	0 (0%)	16 (39%)	20 (49%)	5 (12%)
2016-17	41	1 (2%)	22 (54%)	12 (29%)	6 (15%)
2015-16	42	2 (5%)	14 (33%)	20 (48%)	6 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>4 (1%)</b>	<b>88 (29%)</b>	<b>134 (44%)</b>	<b>79 (26%)</b>

- 3.6 Reflecting this, the Ofsted Annual Report for 2023-24 noted that “prison education remains weak, almost without exception.”<sup>4</sup> A previous Ofsted annual report noted that “every year we report that it [prison education] is the worst performing sector we inspect”.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Charlie Taylor said in July 2024 that “the quality of education and training is almost universally poor”.<sup>6</sup>
- 3.7 There are also concerns about whether people in prison are making sufficient progress. For example, only a minority are achieving Level 2 in English and Maths (the highest level routinely available in prisons). Of the 21,781 people who participated in a functional skills course in 2023-24, only 1,976 achieved Level 2 in English and only 1,334 achieved Level 2 in Maths.<sup>7</sup>
- 3.8 The reasons why prison education is not currently good enough are complex. They include funding, facilities and teaching, as discussed below, as well as the broader prison environment, the extent to which education is a priority in prisons and the challenges of providing a broad and balanced curriculum with the available resources. These challenges, and how they can be overcome, are discussed in more detail in a recent PET briefing, “Getting prison education right: Priorities for the new government”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ofsted (2024) *Ofsted annual report 2023/24: education, children’s services and skills*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202324-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

<sup>5</sup> Ofsted (2022) *Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22: education, children’s services and skills*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202122-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, C. (2024) *Can Labour solve our prisons crisis?* Available at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/can-labour-solve-our-prisons-crisis/>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024) *Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2023 to 2024*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2023-to-2024>

<sup>8</sup> <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2024/09/new-briefing-sets-out-10-recommendations-to-transform-prison-education/>

### ***Delivering further education***

#### ***Funding for further education, including whether the additional £300 million announced by the Chancellor in last year's Budget is sufficient and how it should be distributed***

- 4.1 It is widely recognised that prison education provision is currently chronically underfunded. Following its inquiry on prison education in the last parliament, the Education Select Committee concluded that “prison education is in a perilous state due to a continual decline in funding”.<sup>9</sup>
- 4.2 Novus, one of the education providers, has noted that “funding, and in turn resources available to deliver education, are not enough to support the complexity of need that is presented by the prisoner cohort”, adding that prison education is “underfunded compared to mainstream community provision”.<sup>10</sup> This was echoed by a current prison governor in recent evidence to the Justice Select Committee, who said “I do not have enough of it [education]. It is not the provider's fault. It is that there is not enough money”.<sup>11</sup> This is limiting the work that prison education providers can do to meet the needs of the people who they work with.
- 4.3 Longer term, there is a need for a full review of funding for prison education. In the meantime, however, immediate steps should be taken to increase funding in recognition of what is a longstanding problem that has become increasingly acute in recent years. Additional funding could be provided via the new prison education contracts, via the Dynamic Purchasing System, or both.

#### ***Workforce pressures, including college teachers' pay and the recruitment and retention of staff in all further education settings***

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<sup>9</sup> Education Select Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. Available at

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19606/html/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15420/html/>

- 5.1 As with education in any sector, prison teachers are key, but there are issues with both recruitment and retention. However, these issues are difficult to quantify as data on prison teachers - including the number employed, retention rates and the demographics of the workforce - are not routinely published. This data should be collated and published by HM Prisons and Probation Service, to support workforce development and future planning.
- 5.2 With regards to recruitment, teachers in prison are thought to receive lower wages than in the community, and there are concerns about the limitations of prison teaching as a career. There are few opportunities for progression, insufficient investment in training, poor facilities and little job security. Taken together, these factors create a reluctance to join the prison education workforce. Prison education is also not well known and many teachers may not be aware of it as a career option.
- 5.3 Retention is also an issue, with research carried out in 2021 by the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) and University and College Union (UCU) - the union for prison teachers - finding that seven in ten teachers were considering leaving prison education in the next five years.<sup>12</sup> The risks of people leaving due to elevated levels of stress, limited opportunities for progression (64% of respondents to the PLA/UCU survey said that more opportunities for career development would mean they were more likely to stay) and poor pay and conditions (88% believed that better pay would aid retention) is a cause for significant concern.
- 5.4 While prison teachers are employed by the contracted education providers, it is important that these issues are addressed in a co-ordinated way, which means that the Ministry of Justice should take a leadership role, working with the prison education providers. The Ministry of Justice should therefore develop a strategy in partnership with education providers to ensure that we recruit, retain and develop the prison teachers that we need to deliver high-quality education in prison. The recent publicity campaign aimed at recruiting new prison teachers is a welcome first step in this area.
- 5.5 Consideration also needs to be given as to how best to support other staff working in prison education departments. These staff play a vital role supporting learners and often work in very challenging conditions. In our experience, as an example, Distance Learning Co-ordinators (who enable and support learners to study courses provided by PET and the OU) play a vital role and, as noted in a recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons report, where learners do not get the right support they are less likely to progress and, when studying higher education, more likely to incur additional costs and therefore debt.<sup>13</sup> These roles are crucial and prisons and education providers need to work together to ensure they have the resources, time and support that they need to carry out their roles effectively.

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<sup>12</sup> UCU and the PLA (2021) *Hidden Voices: The experience of teachers working in prisons*. Available at <https://pla.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/08/hidden-voices-report/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2025/02/The-Mount-web-2025.pdf#page=40>

### *Quality of facilities and capital investment strategy*

- 6.1 The quality of prison education departments is also a significant barrier to providing good quality education. Classrooms and other education facilities are too often in an unacceptable state. This was reflected in past 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”.<sup>14</sup> More recently a learner described “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>15</sup>
- 6.2 These issues are exacerbated by the increasing prison population and prison overcrowding. With prisons holding more people than they were designed for, education departments are unlikely to have the capacity needed. This is a particular problem when new cells are added to increase a prison’s capacity, without a commensurate increase in the capacity of prison education departments or other education or training opportunities.
- 6.3 Moreover, the layout of some prisons - with, for example, education departments only accessible from one wing - is not conducive to making education available to everyone. This is particularly the case given the more restricted regimes that are generally in place post-pandemic which, alongside staff shortages, make it more difficult for people to move around prisons. Access to libraries has also suffered.
- 6.4 The Education Select Committee’s 2022 report 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”.<sup>16</sup> Recognising this, HMPPS should commission an independent assessment of the physical condition of prison education departments and develop a prioritised plan for refurbishments and improvements.
- 6.5 In addition, the lack of access to digital devices (i.e. 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.
- 6.6 Improving access to digital devices and the internet is therefore key. While some progress has been made (including the ongoing rollout of the in-cell Launchpad platform), 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”<sup>17</sup>. The majority of people in prison still lack access to a digital device and the internet.

<sup>14</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19555/html/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://insidetime.org/mailbag/education-system-is-not-working/>

<sup>16</sup> Education Select Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>



- 6.7 In-cell digital technology and secure access to the internet should become standard, ensuring that people can choose from the widest range of courses and resources. The Ministry of Justice should publish a strategy setting out how they will make secure access to the internet available across the prison estate, with a focus on making in-cell access available where possible. In developing this strategy, the Ministry of Justice should recognise that access to digital devices and the internet should complement, not replace, face-to-face teaching. It should not be used as an excuse to make people in prison spend more time in their cells.

### ***Skills and apprenticeships***

#### ***How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have***

- 7.1 More than 50,000 people are released from prison each year across England and Wales. Progress has been made in increasing the proportion who secure employment on release. Nearly 20% are employed six weeks after they are released from prison and nearly a third (31%) are employed six months after they are released.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, still a significant number of people leaving prison each year who could, with the right training and support, help to fill gaps in the workforce.
- 7.2 This requires excellent labour market information accessible to prisons, strong links between employers and education providers in prisons, and access to the right education and training in prison to ensure that people have the skills and qualifications they need to move into work when they leave prison. A number of steps have been taken in recent years to achieve this, including:
- the work of the New Futures Network (<https://newfuturesnetwork.gov.uk/>)
  - the creation of Employment Advisory Boards and regional Employment Councils<sup>19</sup>
  - the introduction of prison Employment Hubs and Prison Employment Leads<sup>20</sup>
  - the creation of the Future Skills Programme and HMP Academies programme<sup>21</sup>
- 7.3 These are all welcome but it is essential that progress continues to be made, which will both help employers to fill skills gaps and reduce reoffending. In particular, prisons and education providers must ensure that the qualifications that people achieve in prison are the ones that employers are looking for, to make the move into employment as straightforward as possible.
- 7.4 There are also good examples of prisons working with local further education providers in the community to provide people in prison with the skills that employers need. For example East Kent College runs Eastchurch, a training centre next to HMP/YOI Stanford Hill where learners from the prison are able to participate in a range of training courses, including bricklaying, carpentry and

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<sup>17</sup> p.18: Ministry of Justice (2021) *Prisons Strategy White Paper*. Available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61af18e38fa8f5037e8ccc47/prisons-strategy-white-paper.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-employment-outcomes-update-to-march-2024>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/top-bosses-join-forces-to-get-thousands-of-offenders-into-work>

<sup>20</sup> <https://newfuturesnetwork.gov.uk/employment-hubs/>

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Justice (2023) *Employing prisoners and ex-offenders*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunity-employer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders>

plumbing. They also run a rail engineering programme. HM Inspectorate of Prisons has described this as a “productive relationship” that provides “valuable vocational training”<sup>22</sup> and East Kent College has recently won an award from the Association of Colleges for this work.<sup>23</sup>

- 7.5 Other examples include HMP Ford, which has a partnership with Chichester College that provides both on-site workshops and opportunities to join courses at the college, enabling people to get the skills they need to move into employment. The partnerships between HMP Thorn Cross and Warrington and Vale Royal College and Riverside College were previously praised by Education Select Committee.<sup>24</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons noted that HMP Kirkham has “developed strong links with local further education colleges to expand their curriculum to subjects and levels they could not offer in the prison environment”.<sup>25</sup>
- 7.6 Partnerships with further education colleges that support people leaving prison to access education can also be beneficial. For example, the In2Sport partnership between HMP Bristol and South Gloucestershire and Stroud College supports people who have left prison to gain Level 3 gym instructor and personal trainer qualifications with wrap around pastoral and careers support, work experience and sports activities.<sup>26</sup> Their work has also been recognised by the Association of Colleges.<sup>27</sup>
- 7.7 Partnerships between prisons and local further education colleges should be encouraged, both to enable people in prison to access a broader range of educational opportunities and to support people leaving prison to continue on their educational journey. Core provision in prisons is largely narrow and focused on providing basic skills. Partnerships with local further education colleges can both broaden what is available and tap into local skills needs and employment opportunities.
- 7.8 The Committee may be interested to note that the Centre for Education in Criminal Justice at University College London (UCL) and Justice Futures CIC are currently exploring the future roles for colleges in supporting people on probation and leaving prison into further education and employment. PET is represented on the steering group of this project. They will publish their findings later this year.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2025/02/Standford-Hill-web-2025.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ekcgroup.ac.uk/news/ekc-groups-training-centre-for-prisoners-wins-association-of-colleges-beacon-award/>

<sup>24</sup> Paragraph 67: Education Select Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

<sup>25</sup> [https://hmiprison.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmipris\\_reports/hmp-kirkham/](https://hmiprison.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-kirkham/)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.sgscol.ac.uk/study/sport/in2sport>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/local-news/sgs-college-award-helping-ex-7819118>



***Current challenges for apprenticeships, including employer engagement, funding issues, and apprentice pay***

- 8.1 Following a change in the law that made it possible for people in prison to access apprenticeships, the Ministry of Justice hoped that up to 300 people in prison would be recruited into apprenticeships by 2025. So far, however, only 10 people in prison have participated in apprenticeships and five or fewer have completed an apprenticeship.<sup>28</sup>
- 8.2 While it has taken longer than anticipated to build up the number of people participating in apprenticeships, this has to be seen within the context of the significant pressure on the prison system. Enabling people to successfully complete an apprenticeship in overcrowded and understaffed prisons will have been a real challenge.
- 8.3 In our view, apprenticeships have the potential to provide a route into sustainable employment for some people in prison, and therefore to reduce reoffending. Prisons should make every effort to increase the number of people accessing apprenticeships and to provide the consistent support needed to complete them. The Ministry of Justice should continue, via the New Futures Network, to promote apprenticeships to suitable employers and support them to provide a structure that works for people in prison and prison leavers.

***Supporting young people, widening access, and narrowing the attainment gap***

***The difficulties facing further education students, including mental health issues and access to mental health support, and cost of living pressures***

- 9.1 Custody has a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of people in prison, and this has been exacerbated by the overcrowding, understaffing and regime changes implemented as a response to the pandemic but now embedded in the system. Between 2018<sup>29</sup> and 2023<sup>30</sup>, women in prison reporting mental health problems increased from 67% to 81%, and for men it increased from 43% to 59%. In the 12 months to June 2024, incidents of self-harm in prison increased by 19%.<sup>31</sup>
- 9.2 As well as its rehabilitative benefits, 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. People have reported improved self-esteem, self-confidence, self-discipline and communication skills.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Patel, A. (2025) *Apprenticeships behind bars follows open jail failure*. Available at <https://feweek.co.uk/apprenticeships-behind-bars-follows-open-jail-failure/>

<sup>29</sup> p.44: Prison Reform Trust (2020) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2019*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bromley-Briefings-Prison-Factfile-Winter-2019.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> p.60: Prison Reform Trust (2024) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: February 2024*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winter-2024-factfile.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-june-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-september-2024-assaults-and-self-harm-to-june-2024>

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, C. (2014) *Brain Cells: Listening to Prisoner Learners, Third Edition*. Available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PET-Brain-Cells-3-Report-LR.pdf> and Prison Reform Trust (2003) *Time to Learn: Prisoners' views on prison education*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/time-to-learn-prisoners-views-on-prison-education>

- 9.3 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”.

***The specific barriers to accessing and pursuing further education for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and children and young people in care across specialist and mainstream settings***

- 10.1 The latest data from the Ministry of Justice shows that over half (55%) of people in public sector prisons in England who took an initial assessment and then enrolled on a course had a learning difficulty/disability (LDD).<sup>33</sup> While this is not a perfect measure of the prison population as a whole, it demonstrates that LDDs are significantly more prevalent among people in prison than in the population as a whole.
- 10.2 The Education Select Committee’s inquiry on prison education highlighted the barriers faced by people with LDDs and recommended improvements in screening and in the support provided for this group, while Ofsted have subsequently explored education provision in prison for people with LDDs.<sup>34</sup>
- 10.3 Given the prevalence of additional learning needs among people in prison, ensuring that there is sufficient support in place for this group is essential. This should be a priority for prisons and for education providers, and should be a consideration in determining whether additional funding for prison education is needed.

***Access to higher education, other qualification levels, and employment; career and course guidance***

- 11.1 People in prison currently have limited opportunities to move on to participate in higher education. As noted above, this is primarily through the OU and funded by a student loan. Other universities are exploring the potential of providing courses and some have also set up prison-university partnerships, which bring universities into prisons to teach learners, although they are mostly on hold pending new guidance.
- 11.2 At the moment, however, the “six-year rule” prevents people in prison from getting a student loan until they are within six years of release. This is unhelpful. People in prison should be able to do a degree at the time that best suits their sentence plan and supports their rehabilitation. For many, that will involve doing their degree earlier in their sentence so they can focus on resettlement issues as their release date approaches and potentially take up opportunities to access employment via Release on Temporary Licence. Six years may also not be sufficient time for people in prison to complete an OU degree part time (given the challenges of studying while in prison), meaning that they have to complete it in the community post-release when they could be securing employment.

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<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024) *Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2023 to 2024*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2023-to-2024>

<sup>34</sup> <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/11/education-for-prisoners-with-learning-difficulties-and-or-disabilities/>

- 11.3 In their 2022 report on prison education, the Education Select Committee said that “the Government must remove the “six-year rule” so that prisoners on long sentences can apply for higher education courses earlier in their sentence. This would give them motivation during their sentence and keep them focused on their potential employment opportunities following release”.<sup>35</sup> The Ministry of Justice should work with the Department of Education to implement this recommendation.
- 11.4 This is particularly important as the profile of the prison population has changed and continues to change, with many more people serving long sentences. For example, more than two and a half times as many people were sentenced to 10 years or more in 2022 than in 2010.<sup>36</sup> With people spending longer and longer in prison, doing a degree earlier in their sentence may allow learners to use their time in prison more productively. Improved access to the internet - see above - would make this greater diversity of provision easier to deliver.

## 12) Conclusion

- 12.1 Education provision in prison is an important part of the further education landscape. Its benefits are substantial and well-evidenced. But it also underfunded, frequently undervalued and too often not of sufficient quality. Ofsted judgements on prison education are, for example, significantly poorer overall than those on providers in the community.
- 12.2 One of the key challenges facing prison education is that it is in a silo, distinct from the rest of further education. As a result it is not considered as part of reforms to further education and not subject to similar levels of support or scrutiny. We therefore encourage the Education Select Committee to consider prison education as part of this inquiry, recognising it as a key part of broader further education provision.

March 2025

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<sup>35</sup> Education Select Committee (2022) *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html>

<sup>36</sup> p.16: Prison Reform Trust (2024) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, February 2024*. Available at <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winter-2024-factfile.pdf>