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Prisoners' Education Trust Ref No. EAP004

Evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust to the London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee's inquiry on employment in London after prison

About Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) is an independent charity that offers distance learning courses and related advice and guidance to people in prison. We provide access to around 130 different courses – including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses – enabling people in prison to gain the skills and qualifications they need to secure employment on release.

Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab, which compares outcomes for participants with otherwise similar non-participants, 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

PET's services are available in all prisons in England and Wales, including all prisons in London.

Response to the Committee's questions

PET welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry and have responded below to the questions that are relevant to our areas of expertise.

1. *To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?*

Evidence shows that accessing education while in prison increases the chances of securing employment on release, as set out in response to Question 4 (below). Ensuring that people in prison can access high-quality education should therefore be a priority.

Ensuring access to education for people in prison is beneficial, including in enabling access to employment, because there is a high level of educational need among people in prison. Literacy and numeracy levels are, on average, significantly lower among people sent to prison than in the general population. The contrast in literacy rates with the broader population is particularly stark – 71% of people in prison have literacy levels at or below Entry Level 3, compared to

¹ Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954465/Prisoners_Education_Trust_PET_4th_analysis_report.pdf

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14.9% of the general adult population. The equivalent figures for numeracy are 73% of people in prison compared to 49.1% of the general adult population. These core functional skills are key to securing employment.²

In addition, nearly half of people in prison have no formal qualifications. Research found that just 53% of people in prison reported having at least one qualification (including GCSEs or equivalent and higher qualifications, and trade apprenticeships) prior to entering prison. By comparison around 85% of the general population had at least one qualification.³ Qualifications can be essential in securing employment.

By improving the skills of people in prison and enabling them to secure the qualifications that employers need, participating in education while in prison can help ensure that people leaving prison are as well placed as possible to enter employment. In general, however, prison education provision is currently nowhere near good enough.

This is true across England, with the education provision at 54% of the prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) inspected in 2023–24 judged by Ofsted to be ‘inadequate’ (the lowest rating available). 33% were judged to be ‘requires improvement’. Only 13% (five prisons) were ‘good’ and none were ‘outstanding’. Reflecting this, the Ofsted Annual Report for 2023–24 noted that “prison education remains weak, almost without exception”.⁴

This is also the case for adult prisons in London, as set out in the table in Appendix 1.

The vast majority of men’s prisons in London were given an overall rating of ‘inadequate’ at their last Ofsted inspection. The exceptions are HMP Thameside, which was rated as ‘requires improvement’, and HMP Wormwood Scrubs. The last inspection at HMP Wormwood Scrubs was carried out in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic so Ofsted did not give an overall rating. However, it was assessed as ‘reasonably good’ for purposeful activity by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP).

There are two women’s prisons on the outskirts of London, HMP Bronzefield and HMP Downview. HMP Bronzefield was given an overall rating of ‘good’ by Ofsted when it was last inspected in 2022. HMP Downview was not given an overall rating by Ofsted when it was last inspected in 2021, as it was in the process of recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was assessed as ‘not sufficiently good’ for purposeful activity by HMIP.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2023-to-2024>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/199224/compendium-of-reoffending-statistics-and-analysis.pdf

⁴ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202324-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202324>

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Not only is education provision not of sufficient quality, but not enough people can access it. In total 63,744 people participated in a course in prison in England in 2022–23. This is significantly lower than the peak level in 2014–15, when 101,600 people took part in a course. In 2023–24, 49,965 people participated in a course in prison. A change in methodology means that these figures are not directly comparable to previous years, but it is safe to say that the number of people participating in educational courses is still nowhere near the levels of a decade or so ago.

Figures for individual prisons are not available, but we know that in a number of prisons in London there is not sufficient capacity in education, training and work for the number of people that the prisons are now holding. For example, a recent inspection of HMP Pentonville noted that there were fewer than 600 activity spaces for a population of 1,207.⁵

Moreover prisons are not consistently making full use of the education capacity that they have available. Of the five prisons in England that had attendance rates in education in 2023–24 of less than 50%, three – HMP/YOI Feltham B, HMP Wandsworth and HMP Wormwood Scrubs – were in London. Three more London prisons – HMP Belmarsh, HMP Pentonville and HMP Thameside – had attendance rates of less than 60% (the average for prisons in England was 72%). This is caused, at least in part, by overcrowding and staffing shortages across the prison estate, which leads to people in prison spending too much time in their cell and not enough time engaged in purposeful activity (including education and training) that would help them to get a job on release.

In addition, while some progress has been made in improving access to digital devices (e.g. a laptop or tablet) and the internet, most people in prison do not routinely have access to either. This means that they cannot develop the digital skills that are now essential for life outside prison, including in the workplace, and they 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 routinely available in the community.

For people under the age of 18 there is one YOI in London, HMYOI Feltham A. At its last inspection in 2024, Ofsted assessed its education, skills and work provision to be ‘inadequate’. HMIP assessed their provision of purposeful activity as ‘poor’. This reflects the provision of education in YOIs generally, with a joint review by HMIP and Ofsted finding “a bleak picture of steadily declining educational opportunities and quality, reduced work experience and work

⁵ https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-pentonville-urgent-notification/

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opportunities, and sharply reduced time out of cell for children”.⁶ Oasis Restore, the secure school in Kent, is a new model of custody for young people that is intended to be more education focused, but it is too early to say what impact it will have.

Despite this concerning broader picture, there are a number of charities and other external organisations that look to complement and extend the core education provision in prisons in London.

This includes our work at PET to enable adults in prison to study a distance learning course, which can enable them to secure skills and qualifications that will help them to get a job on release. As noted above, PET offers access to more than 130 courses and our most popular courses are often employment focused.⁷ During 2024, PET received 3,082 applications from people in prison and funded 1,540 courses. This included 163 in prisons in London (from 332 applications) – see table below.⁸

Prison	Applications (2024)	Successful applications (2024)
HMP Belmarsh	39	15
HMP Brixton	20	7
HMP Bronzefield	22	13
HMP Downview	33	17
HMP/YOI Feltham B	64	30
HMP High Down	81	52
HMP Isis	32	12
HMP Pentonville	10	3
HMP Thameside	10	4
HMP Wandsworth	13	6
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	8	4
Total	332	163

As set out below, evidence shows that accessing a course provided through PET increases the likelihood of securing employment on release. We are keen to see as many applications as

⁶ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children>

⁷ Details of our 10 most popular courses in 2024 are available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2025/01/2024s-top-distance-learning-courses-in-prison/>

⁸ PET only funds courses for people who have been sentenced, not people on remand. This may affect some prisons in London, which currently predominantly hold people on remand.

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possible from people in prison in London, to enable them to study courses that support their rehabilitation.

There are a range of other organisations that provide education or training in prisons in London to complement the core education on offer. For example, there is The Clink restaurant in HMP Brixton, the tattooing course provided by the Elever Training Institute in HMP Pentonville⁹, barista training provided by Redemption Roasters in HMP High Down and the Vocalise programme, which is led by trainee barristers and provides training in public speaking and debating. While it tends to have limited capacity, this diverse provision is wholly welcome and should be part of what all prisons offer, tailored to the needs and interests of their populations.

In addition, there have been some positive developments in prison education in recent years. Employment Advisory Boards (EABs) have been introduced, to act as a link between prisons and employers and ensure that the education and training available will give people the skills that they need to secure a job on release.¹⁰ Regional Employment Councils, which will involve the Probation Service and the Department for Work and Pensions as well as prison and employers, have recently been announced to complement EABs.¹¹ The New Futures Network was also established to work with employers to help create job opportunities for people leaving prison. In addition, Heads of Education, Skills and Work, a new senior role in prisons to focus on education, were introduced. These changes were all positive steps that PET supports.

In response to this question we have focused primarily on prisons in London. It should be noted, however, that not all people from London or planning to settle in London post-release will necessarily be held in a prison in London. Most adult prisons in London are now reception prisons, supporting the courts in London and holding people on remand, with fewer resettlement prisons available to hold people due to be released in London. This may be a barrier for people returning to London in seeking work on release. In particular, there are no open prisons in London so anyone held in an open prison will need to be held outside London, even if they plan to live there on release.

2. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?

If people cannot access education in prison then they are less likely to have the skills they need to thrive in the labour market (including 'soft skills') or the qualifications they may need to access specific jobs. In a competitive job market, where people leaving prison may already be

⁹ <https://insidetime.org/newsround/pentonville-offers-first-tattoo-course-for-prisoners/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/leading-uk-business-bosses-help-prison-leavers-get-work-in-crime-cutting-drive>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/top-bosses-join-forces-to-get-thousands-of-offenders-into-work>

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disadvantaged due to their criminal record, this is an additional barrier that people may struggle to overcome.

As mentioned above, people leaving prison may particularly lack the digital skills to look for and secure work on release. Digital skills are of growing importance in the modern economy, and in looking for and applying for jobs, but a lack of access to laptops and tablets and to the internet in prison prevents people from developing these crucial skills.

4. *Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?*

Evidence is clear that accessing education in prison increases the likelihood of securing employment on release. The evidence on the efficacy of prison education, including in securing employment post-release, is summarised in 'Prison education – A review of the evidence'¹², a report written by PET and published by Clinks (the national infrastructure body supporting the voluntary sector working in criminal justice).

This evidence includes a report published by the Ministry of Justice in 2018 which found that people who had accessed education in prison were more likely to be in employment one year after release and were less likely to reoffend within one year of release than people in prison who had not participated in education.¹³

These positive findings are echoed in other research reviews. For example, a rapid evidence assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in reducing reoffending and increasing employment, conducted by academics at Manchester Metropolitan University and published in 2017, found that participating in education increased the likelihood of gaining employment by 24%.¹⁴ A comprehensive meta-analysis of the available evidence by RAND similarly found that the likelihood of obtaining employment post-release among people who participated in education in prison was 13 percent higher than for those who did not participate.¹⁵

In addition, analysis of the impact of PET's work, mentioned above, found that 40% of the people who received grants for distance learning through PET were employed during the one-year period after release. This is significantly more than the comparison group (33%). It also found that people who accessed courses through PET were less likely to reoffend than

¹² Available at <https://www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence>

¹³ Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf

¹⁴ Available at <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/618360/>

¹⁵ Available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

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otherwise similar people who did not.¹⁶ These findings echoed the findings of earlier JDL analyses of PET's impact published in 2014, 2015 and 2018.

5. *What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?*

As set out above, the quality and availability of education in prison is currently not good enough. Addressing this should be a priority for central government.

In September 2024, PET published a briefing setting out 10 recommendations to improve prison education.¹⁷ These recommendations focused on the changes that should be made by the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS nationally to make prison education work. In particular the Ministry of Justice should prioritise increasing funding for prison education, supporting the recruitment, development and retention of prison teachers, and improving access to digital devices and the internet for people in prison.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that prison education does not operate in isolation – it is part of the broader prison regime. It is therefore important that broader improvements to prisons are made, including increasing staffing levels, tackling overcrowding and improving the physical state of the prison estate (including education departments and workshops).

Locally, in thinking about skills development in London and as part of the Skills for Londoners initiative the Mayor should consider how training providers and further education and higher education providers in London could be encouraged and incentivised to work in partnership with prisons in London to augment and complement the education currently provided in prisons. Partnerships between further education colleges and prisons, for example, can be very effective in enabling people in prison to gain employment-related skills and qualifications.

The Mayor should also consider how work to identify and close skills gaps in London can include people leaving prison. This could include considering how the Mayor's team could contribute to the work of EABs and of Heads of Education, Work and Skills in prisons to ensure that the education and training that people receive in prison aligns with the needs of employers in London. Finally, the Mayor and members of the London Assembly should use the profile of their roles to champion the employment of people leaving prison.

¹⁶ Available at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954465/Prisoners_Education_Trust_PET_4th_analysis_report.pdf

¹⁷ Available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/resource/getting-prison-education-right-priorities-for-the-new-government/>

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Appendix 1: Education data for adult prisons in London¹⁸

Prison	Inspections by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted		Annual prison performance ratings for 2023-24 ¹⁹			
	Overall Ofsted rating at last inspection (date in brackets)	HMIP assessment on purposeful activity at last inspection ⁱ	Attendance at education courses ⁱⁱ	Progress in English and Maths ⁱⁱⁱ	Achievement of vocational qualifications ^{iv}	Percentage of prisoners in purposeful activity ^v
HMP Belmarsh	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	59.6%	4.8%	79.8%	50.5%
HMP Brixton	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	76.6%	3.2%	93%	64.8%
HMP Bronzefield	Good (2022)	Reasonably good	-	-	-	-
HMP Downview	-	Reasonably good	74.4%	10.3%	86.6%	78.4%
HMP/YOI Feltham B	Inadequate (2023)	Poor	47.6%	7.9%	89.8%	44.2%
HMP High Down	Inadequate (2023)	Poor	60.2%	4.2%	85.3%	54.0%
HMP Isis	Inadequate (2022)	Poor	61.6%	8.1%	82.4%	33.2%
HMP Pentonville	Inadequate (2022) ²⁰	Poor	52.8%	0.9%	92.5%	52.2%
HMP Thameside	Requires improvement (2025)	Not sufficiently good	57.3%	4.6%	88.8%	-
HMP Wandsworth	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	48.9%	0.2%	90.2%	51.7%
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	-	Not sufficiently good	49.0%	1.5%	79.4%	40.5%

¹⁸ For this analysis we have included HMP Bronzefield, HMP Downview and HMP High Down, which are all in the greater London area.

¹⁹ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-ratings-2023-to-2024>

²⁰ HMP Pentonville was inspected in 2025, and an [Urgent Notification](#) has been issued, but the full report has not been published yet.

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ⁱ Purposeful activity is activity for people in prison that is likely to benefit them. As part of each prison inspection HMIP assesses it as “good”, “reasonably good”, “not sufficiently good” or “poor” as part of their healthy prison test.

ⁱⁱ The percentage of people in prison attending classroom or workshop lessons in custody, as a proportion of the number of lessons the prisoner is expected to attend. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 72%.

ⁱⁱⁱ The percentage of people in prison, initially assessed as being below level 2 in English and/or Maths, who make progress by achieving an accredited qualification in either or both of these subjects while in custody. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 8.4%.

^{iv} The percentage of vocational courses which are successfully achieved by people in prison. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 88.9%.

^v The percentage of people in prison in at least half-time purposeful activity, as a proportion of all people in prison in scope. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 69.7%.