Prisoners' Education Trust

Our Strategy

2027–2031

Foreword

When I was in prison, I saw PET offered an Open University Access Module. I thought to study something like this would get me up and running. It would get my brain working and it would build my confidence.

I felt more focused when I was studying. I felt like there was something to achieve: just buckling down, having the discipline to hit my targets within the timelines. All the background noise of the environment that we were living in faded away a little bit, because now I'm working towards something and I'm learning as well.

I remember telling my mum and she was pleased – "You're not just wasting away, you're doing something with your time." She was just happy with the fact that my willingness to learn was still there.

When I was further into my course, I was transferred to an open prison. I was fortunate enough to have access to a computer suite. It made a huge difference because I could type everything up. Where I started the course previously, I was literally handwriting. I could finish my essays a lot quicker and I was able to perform my tasks a lot more efficiently.

The education department was very helpful. If I had an issue or I wanted to contact my tutor, they could just pick up the phone and give them a call. So I was like, "Oh, okay, I can get the support I will need".

Having the support from PET was essential too – I could contact their free Advice Line where I was able to speak to someone who reassured me when I came up against complicated tasks and deadlines, thus gaining the confidence needed to persevere and eventually complete my course.

Some of the things I learnt – especially on how society works and the psychology behind how groups form – that's knowledge and information that I use today in my current life.

After prison, I joined PET as a Lived Experience Consultant, working on projects to help reach and support more learners. I thought of it as an opportunity to get involved in the work that it takes to do the same for people in my situation who are still residing in prison.

Because I remember how I felt when the letter came through to say that I'd been accepted on my course – that was a lovely moment. It felt good to then be a part of that journey, to give that joy to other people in prison.

An opportunity came up to apply to become PET's Engagement and Development Officer and I was successful.

I learnt so much – getting into a position where I'm running projects and setting timelines for work to be completed. I learnt about managing a team: the interpersonal, sociable skills when you've got a responsibility to manage people who you had been working alongside in the same position.

That skillset gave me the confidence to step up into roles where I would need to have responsibility – to be like, "Yeah, I could take care of that, no problem – just leave that with me."

The work PET does changes people's lives. It sets them on a path of rehabilitation, progression, and gives them the opportunity to learn something that they could take with them for the rest of their lives.

Zephaniah
Prisoners' Education Trust alumnus

Introduction

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) believes that access to education is a core aspect of rehabilitation. We have funded more than 50,000 courses over nearly four decades and feedback from our learners tells us that being able to complete a PET-funded course has changed their lives. Ministry of Justice research has shown that accessing PET courses reduces the chance of reoffending by over 20% and increases the likelihood of finding employment by over 20% too.

Our mission – everyone in prison a learner, every prison a place to learn – is the driver of everything we do at PET, and our work has never been more important.

Prison education is under severe pressure. Prison regimes have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels due to overcrowding and staff shortages. More worryingly, new contracts have caused cuts in education provision and narrowed the curriculum available in many prisons.

We are concerned that people in prison cannot access education that meets their needs and aspirations, and that any reduction in access to education has a detrimental impact on reducing reoffending. Bridging this gap is central to our new strategy, as demand for the breadth and variety of courses PET can offer is likely to increase.

As the leading specialist provider of distance learning for people in prison, we will continue to advocate for greater access to education and use our experience and expertise to influence policy and practice. Our ambition is to deliver excellence for our learners and innovation in digital access to learning, while recognising the challenging financial environment facing all organisations working in the justice sector.

Our new strategy is built on firm foundations. As an organisation, we are in robust good health and have an experienced and dedicated staff team who work tirelessly to deliver on our vision and mission. Our staff, Board of Trustees, partners, learners and alumni have all been involved in developing this strategy and we thank them for their contributions.

Notwithstanding the challenges facing prison education, this is a strategy that puts better access to education at its very core. We are excited about what we can achieve with and for our learners over the next five years.

Paul Kelly
Chair

Jon Collins
Chief Executive

Our strategy
2027–2031 at a glance

Prisoners' Education Trust provides access to distance learning for people in prison and informs and influences prison education policy. This strategy sets out our priorities for the next five years.

Our vision:

Lives transformed through learning in prison.

Our mission:

Everyone in prison a learner, every prison a place to learn.

Our values:

We inspire, we care, we are expert, we are determined and we are inclusive.

Our pillars

Over the next five years we will focus our attention on three pillars.

Excellence in distance learning provision	We will provide access to high-quality distance learning courses and related information, advice and guidance, while innovating to improve the services that we offer.
Innovation in digital access to learning	We will expand our use of digital technology to enhance what we provide to learners and improve learner experiences.
Influence on prison education policy and practice	We will use our expertise and experience to inform and influence the future development of prison education policy and practice.

Our foundations

Our foundations will ensure that the people, systems, funding and culture are in place to deliver our mission and achieve the best possible outcomes for learners.

Putting **lived experience and alumni** at the heart of our work.

Ensuring **financial resilience** based on robust financial management.

Embedding **equity, diversity and inclusion** in everything we do.

Underpinning our work with **data and evidence** to drive continuous improvement.

Investing in our people, focusing on performance, development and wellbeing.

Maintaining **effective governance** that drives our work forward.

Our impact

This strategy will strengthen our position as the leading provider of distance learning for people in prison and the foremost independent voice on prison education, enabling us to help more people in prison gain the skills, qualifications and confidence they need to thrive on release.

About Prisoners' Education Trust

At PET we believe that everyone in prison, wherever they are and whatever their background, should have access to education.

Research shows that 93% of people in prison grew up in the most deprived areas in the country, 78% had special educational needs identified while at school, 56% were persistently absent from school, and just 9% passed five or more GCSEs. They were too often failed by the school system. Time spent in prison can be a chance to address this.

PET plays a key role in meeting this need. Working with prisons across England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, we enable people to access distance learning courses in levels and subjects that are otherwise unavailable. We fund around 1,600 distance learning courses for people in prison each year. We also provide information, advice and guidance on distance learning to thousands of people in prison and their families, including through our dedicated Advice Line.

We use our policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show prisons, policymakers and the public the positive impact it can have – for people in prison, their families and society. Our work with people with lived experience of prison, including our alumni, ensures that their voices are at the heart of everything we do, shaping our services and strengthening our influence.

Founded in 1989, PET has now funded over 50,000 educational awards to people in prison. Ministry of Justice research through the Justice Data Lab has shown that accessing PET courses reduces the chance of reoffending by over 20% and increases the likelihood of finding employment by over 20%. Our learners tell us that participating in distance learning is transformational, improving their mental health and wellbeing, and giving them confidence and hope for the future.

PET occupies a distinct place in the prison education landscape. We combine direct support to learners, robust evidence of impact and a respected policy voice. This enables us to not only help individual learners access education, but also to influence the wider system and shape the future of prison education.

Our vision, mission and values

Vision:

Lives transformed through learning in prison.

Mission:

Everyone in prison a learner, every prison a place to learn.

Our values

PET's values are not aspirations. They are how we work, every day, with every learner, partner and colleague. Our values are:

We inspire: Through the services we offer and the stories we share, we inspire people in prison to reach their potential and we celebrate their achievements.

We care: We care about people in prison and about our staff team. We support people, helping them to realise their ambitions, and put wellbeing first.

We are expert: We use our expertise to deliver our work to the highest standards, while also learning from and collaborating with other experts.

We are determined: We strive to make education available to all people in prison, despite the barriers they face, and do everything we can to support them to succeed.

We are inclusive: We value everyone's contributions, particularly those of people with lived experience, and create an environment where everyone can thrive. Our commitment to education for all underpins the services we provide.

What we have achieved: 2022–2026

Our strategy for 2022–2026 set out seven aims to build on PET's strengths and move the organisation forward. A thorough review of our work during this period has demonstrated the progress that we have made and helped identify priorities for this new strategy.

> Studying in prison has given me a sense of purpose, helped me focus on my future and has improved my mental health drastically. I no longer feel as though valuable time is being wasted, I am creating a better version of myself. It has given me a sense of normality and is gradually removing my fears for the future and replacing these feelings with hope and excitement for what could be possible upon release.
>
> – **A PET learner**

Sustaining and growing our core mission

Throughout the strategy period, and despite the many challenges facing the prison system, PET has delivered on our core mission, enabling people in prison to access high-quality distance learning courses and related advice and guidance. In the first four years of this strategy period, 2022–2025, we provided access to more than 6,000 courses. We also provided information, advice and guidance on more than 15,500 occasions, including taking nearly 5,000 calls on our Advice Line. Demand for what we provide continued to grow year on year.

Extending our reach and the support we offer to learners

To ensure that more people in prison can study successfully, we revamped and reshaped our services. Through a major project funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, we carried out targeted engagement with communities underrepresented among our learners – older people, Muslims, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. We enhanced the support we provide to learners and prison staff, including producing new resources and regularly updating our prospectus. We improved accessibility, for example by adapting the format of our prospectus and the language we use. We also carried out research on how to improve course completion rates for women learners.

Pioneering digital delivery

The last five years have seen us take significant strides forward in achieving our long-held goal of offering our courses digitally. We have pioneered effective digital education delivery in prison, launching a website available to people in prison, developing free digital courses that anyone can access, and successfully piloting the delivery of funded courses digitally for the first time. This laid the groundwork for the digital development and innovation that is central to this new strategy.

Using our policy voice

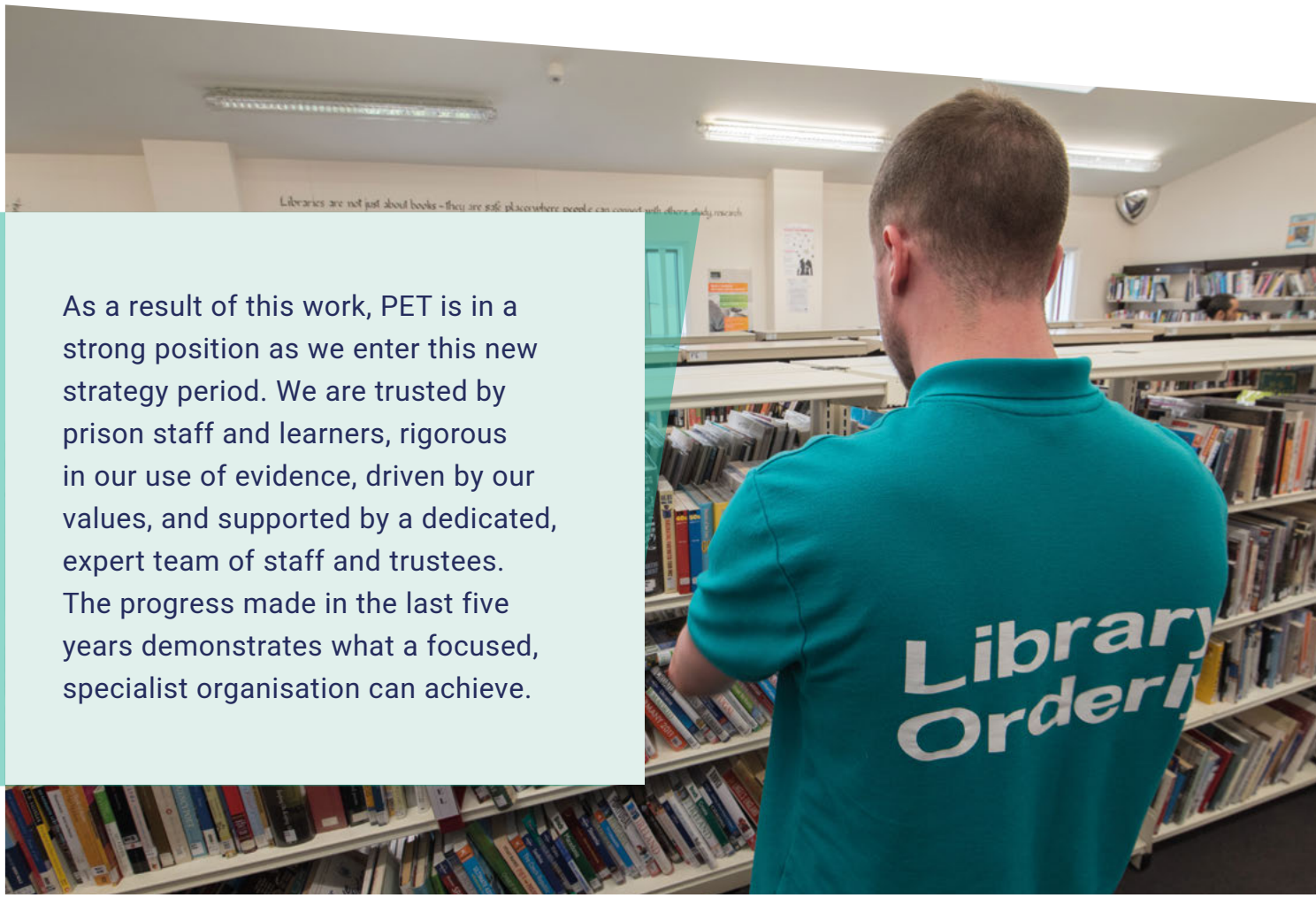
PET is the leading independent voice on prison education. We have continued to inform and influence prison education policy, working with civil servants, parliamentarians and sector partners. We published briefings, responded to consultations, submitted evidence to inquiries and appeared in the media, all advocating for improvements in the availability and quality of prison education.

Embedding lived experience

Lived experience is at the heart of what we do and who we are. We have deepened our work with alumni and people with lived experience, ensuring that there are people with lived experience on our Board of Trustees and staff team, refreshing our Alumni Advisory Group, and employing lived experience consultants for the first time to contribute to our service development work.

Working in partnership

Partnerships and collaboration are central to our work. We have worked with prisons and prison staff, and with HM Prison and Probation Service, to deliver our services. We have worked with our course providers to make sure we supply the right courses for our learners. And we have worked with all our funders to make sure as many learners as possible can access what we offer. We could not have done what we have done over the last five years without their support.



As a result of this work, PET is in a strong position as we enter this new strategy period. We are trusted by prison staff and learners, rigorous in our use of evidence, driven by our values, and supported by a dedicated, expert team of staff and trustees. The progress made in the last five years demonstrates what a focused, specialist organisation can achieve.

The context we work in

PET's next strategy period will be shaped by significant, ongoing changes across the prison estate and in the funding landscape.

A growing and changing prison population

The prison population in England and Wales is projected to continue to grow significantly, with prisons already under severe pressure and over half currently overcrowded. People serving longer sentences need access to high-level courses, progression pathways and sustained support.

Prison education under pressure

Despite extensive evidence that prison education reduces reoffending, new contracts have resulted in cuts to education provision and narrowed the curriculum in many prisons. This may lead to greater demand for the breadth and variety of courses that PET can offer, but at the same time lead to education departments having less capacity to support distance learning.

Digital infrastructure expanding

Access to digital technology in prison is expanding. HM Prison and Probation Service has developed and rolled out a Digital Education Platform that is now available in all public sector prisons and there is growing recognition of the importance of digital learning. This creates opportunities for PET, but expanding our digital offering requires investment. Challenges – including access and security limitations – remain.

A challenging funding environment

Charitable funding remains constrained. Trust and foundation income, which is key in supporting PET's work, faces growing pressure from increased demand across the sector. However, individual giving continues to grow and corporate funding offers potential that PET will explore further.

These are significant challenges. But they also underline the importance of PET's work and the need for a focused strategy that makes the most of the resources and relationships we have built.

> I just want to say thank you for the opportunity to learn and gain an education. I left school at the age of 11 as I was bullied and I was always told I would never amount to anything. PET has given me hope for a brighter future and real chance of making something of myself and making my little girl proud of her Dad. Thank you so much.
>
> – **A PET learner**

Our Strategic Framework for 2027–2031

The next five years

PET enters this new strategy period from a position of strength. We are the leading specialist provider of distance learning to people in prison, with a track record of delivery that stretches back nearly four decades.

We enable people in prison to access a broad range of high-quality distance learning courses; we provide expert information, advice and guidance to thousands of people each year; we have already begun pioneering digital education in prison; and our policy work is respected across the sector and in government. We ensure that the voices of learners and alumni shape everything we do.

Despite all we have done, however, too many people in prison still cannot access education that meets their needs and aspirations. Closing that gap is at the centre of everything this strategy sets out to do.

Our strategic pillars

To achieve this, PET's strategy has three pillars:

1. **Excellence in distance learning provision**
2. **Innovation in digital access to learning**
3. **Influence on prison education policy and practice**

Each pillar sets out what we want to achieve by 2031.

Alongside continuing and developing our service delivery and policy work, we will prioritise digital access to learning as it is central to providing learners with a modern learning experience that reflects what is available in the community, to maintaining a broad course offer, and to using our resources effectively.

Together, the pillars reflect both the ambition we have for our learners and the realism that a challenging financial environment demands. Sustaining and developing our work over five years will require disciplined use of resources and, for our broader ambitions, securing additional funding.

Our foundations

Underpinning these pillars are robust organisational foundations that enable us to achieve our ambitions. These are set out on page 24 and show how we will ensure PET has the people, culture, funding and systems in place to deliver.

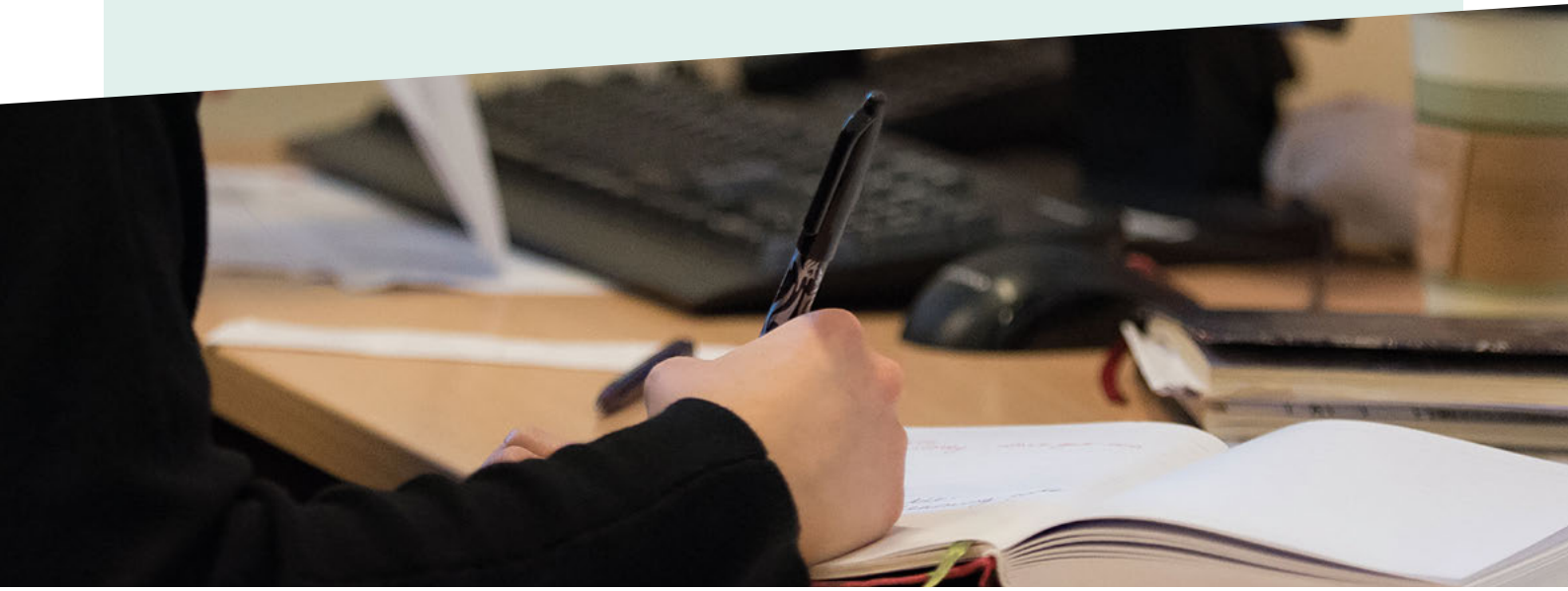
Pillar 1:

Excellence in distance learning provision

We will provide access to high-quality distance learning courses and related information, advice and guidance, while innovating to improve the services that we offer.

Our key priorities for 2027–2031 will be to:

- Enable people in prison to access high-quality distance learning courses that meet their needs and aspirations.
- Provide access to expert information, advice and guidance, including through our Advice Line, to ensure learners get the support they need.
- Strengthen our partnerships with course providers, working together to ensure that courses meet the needs and interests of learners and are suitable for studying in prison.
- Work alongside prison staff to ensure that current and potential learners are provided with informed advice and support.
- Support more learners to complete their courses by collecting and analysing data to understand learner journeys, identify where learners face barriers, and take steps to address any identified issues.



If we can secure sufficient additional funding, we will also:

- Test a peer-based model whereby learners and alumni provide support to other learners, to improve the learner experience and raise completion rates.
- Build on our work to improve completion rates for women, ensuring that they receive appropriate advice and support.

By the end of 2031, PET will have:

- Enabled people in prison to access at least 7,500 more distance learning courses and provided information, advice and guidance on at least 22,500 more occasions.
- Deepened our partnerships with course providers and with prison staff to enhance the support that learners receive.
- Used the data that we collect to develop our services, improving learners' experiences and increasing course completion rates.
- Tested new ways of working, including a peer-based model of providing support to learners and new approaches to working with women learners.

> "PET has not only helped me plan for my future employment goals but has given me hope for a brighter positive outcome for when I return back to the community.
>
> – **A PET learner**

Pillar 2:

Innovation in digital access to learning

We will expand our use of digital technology to enhance what we provide to learners and improve learner experiences.

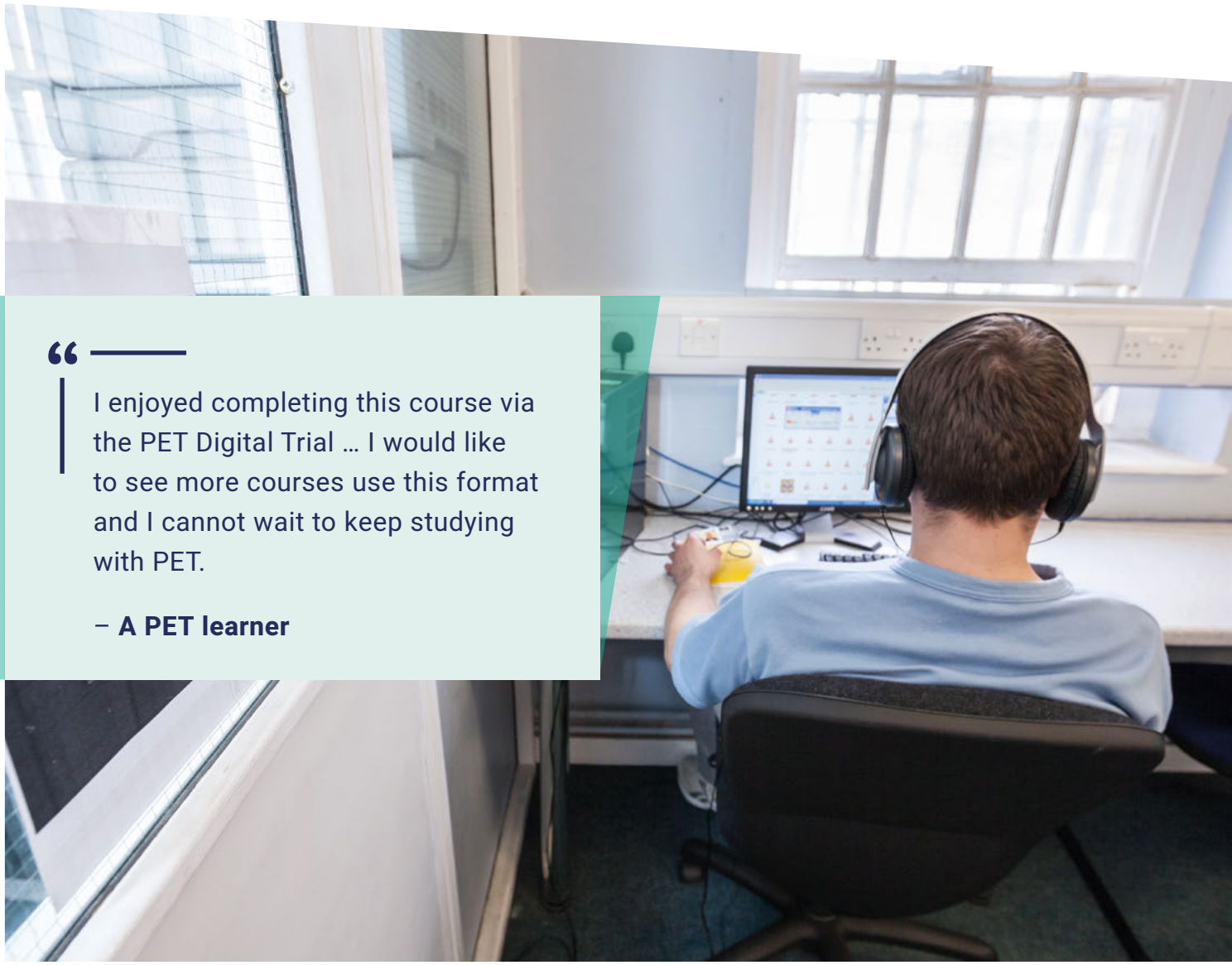
Our key priorities for 2027–2031 will be to:

- Increase the availability of funded digital courses to people in prison, increasing both the number of courses available and the number of prisons they are available in.
- Provide free digital courses for people in prison, enabling them to prepare for studying a funded course and serving populations who cannot otherwise access PET courses.
- Trial a digital application process to enable people in prison to apply to PET digitally for distance learning courses.
- Explore the potential to enable people in prison to study a PET course digitally in their cell or on their wing, to complement access in education departments.

The pace and scale at which we can develop our digital offer will depend on the resources available to us. If we can secure additional funding for this pillar, we will accelerate the roll-out of funded digital courses and expand the range of free digital courses we produce, extending the reach of our work to more people in more prisons.

By the end of 2031, PET will have:

- Made significant progress towards our goal of making funded courses routinely available digitally to people in prison.
- Substantially increased the number of free digital courses that we make available to people in prison.
- Conducted a trial of a process that would enable people in prison to apply digitally for a PET course.



> "I enjoyed completing this course via the PET Digital Trial … I would like to see more courses use this format and I cannot wait to keep studying with PET.
>
> – **A PET learner**

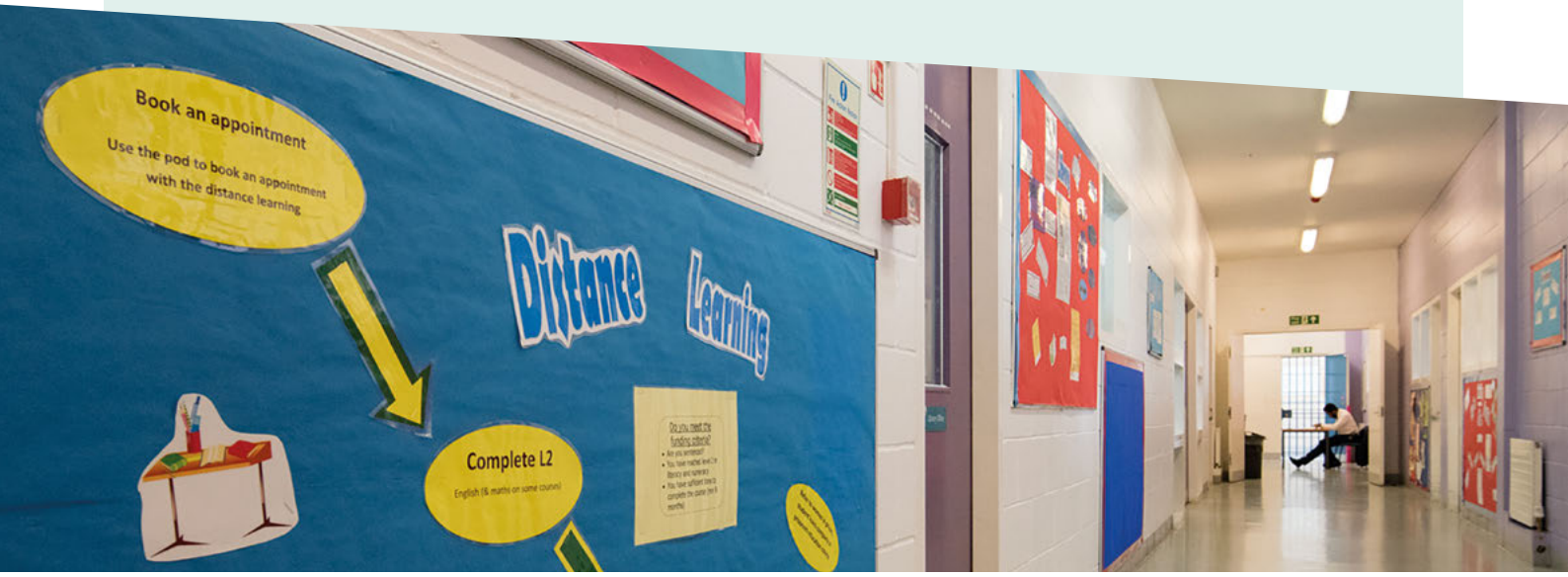
Pillar 3:

Influence on prison education policy and practice

We will use our expertise and experience to inform and influence the future development of prison education policy and practice.

Our key priorities for 2027–2031 will be to:

- Proactively promote changes in policy and practice that will improve the availability, quality and accessibility of education in prison.
- Use our expertise and experience to inform and shape policy and media debates on prison education and related issues.
- Work with sector partners and alliances to ensure prison education is a priority issue in debates on prison reform.
- Use the media, including social media, to inform and influence key stakeholders.
- Enable and empower people with lived experience of prison education to share their stories, inspiring others and demonstrating the power of learning in prison.



If we can secure additional funding for this pillar, we will strengthen our influencing work further, carrying out and publishing original research and gathering and promoting evidence and examples of best practice to drive improvements across the sector.

By the end of 2031, PET will have:

- Retained and enhanced our reputation as the leading source of knowledge and expertise on prison education.
- Helped secure changes in prison education policy, particularly in areas where we have led or shaped the case for change.
- Secured media coverage on the importance of prison education and the changes needed to improve it.

> Thank you to PET for the incredible work they do and for giving me the platform to share my journey. I hope my story inspires others to believe in the possibility of change.
>
> – **A PET alumnus**

Our foundations

To enable us to deliver on the ambitious agenda we have set out, we will ensure that PET has robust foundations. We will put in place the people, systems, funding and culture to deliver our mission and achieve the best possible outcomes for learners.

Our foundations are made up of six key elements.

Lived experience and alumni

Lived experience engagement, including working with our alumni, is central to PET's identity. We will keep it at the heart of our work, ensuring it is reflected in our staff team and Board of Trustees and embedding it in how we design and deliver our services and in our influencing work.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) will be embedded across every pillar, building on progress made during 2022–2026. We will ensure our services are supportive, responsive and accessible, our team is diverse and our culture is inclusive and fair.

Our people

PET's work depends on our expert, experienced staff team. We will invest in staff development and wellbeing, recognising that looking after the people who deliver our mission is essential to achieving it.

Financial resilience

We enter this period in a sound financial position, thanks to careful stewardship and the generosity of our funders. Sustaining our work will require robust financial management and the willingness to prioritise and adapt as circumstances change.

Data and evidence

Good quality data enables PET to develop and deliver our services with confidence. We will strengthen how we capture, analyse and act on data to understand learners, measure outcomes and drive continuous improvement.

Effective governance

Good governance drives PET forward and holds our staff team to account. PET's Board of Trustees will continue to provide effective, informed governance with diverse perspectives and lived experience representation.

Priorities for 2027–2031

To further strengthen our foundations, our priorities for 2027–2031 will be to:

- Embed lived experience further into our core ways of working, based on robust and sustainable structures.
- Identify and pursue measurable EDI commitments that inform and support the delivery of our organisational priorities.
- Prioritise staff development and wellbeing to sustain a high-performing team.
- Maintain reserves at or above the agreed minimum level throughout the period.
- Strengthen our relationships with existing funders while also exploring new sources of income, such as corporate funders.
- Develop our collection and use of data to enable us to track performance and impact across all pillars.
- Ensure that the Board of Trustees continues to provide effective governance for the organisation.

By the end of 2031, PET will have:

- Continued to embed a positive, inclusive culture across the organisation, with lived experience at the heart of all that we do.
- Maintained a robust financial position while using the available resources efficiently and effectively, enabling us to sustain and develop our work.
- Added to the evidence that demonstrates our impact, with clear measures showing the difference that our work makes for learners.

The impact of our strategy

Implementing this strategy will ensure that by the end of 2031 we will have strengthened our position as the leading provider of distance learning to people in prison and the foremost independent voice on prison education.

We will have enabled thousands of people to study a distance learning course, while also enhancing the support we offer to learners, making substantial progress towards delivering our courses digitally, and continuing to innovate and improve our services. We will have used our policy voice to secure meaningful change on the issues where we have distinctive insight. People in prison will know that we advocate on their behalf and amplify their voices. And lived experience will be further embedded in everything we do.

This strategy builds on what PET does best: enabling people in prison to access education that would otherwise be unavailable to them. In a system under enormous pressure, the consistency and quality of what we provide matters now more than ever.

Measuring progress

We are committed to understanding the difference our work makes. We will be transparent about our progress, sharing what we learn with our funders, partners and the people we work with.

Each pillar of the strategy will have a defined set of measures, agreed during implementation planning and reported to the Board. Our reporting will include learner outcome data and specific EDI metrics, so that we can track not just what we deliver but who we reach and how effectively.

A mid-strategy review in 2029 will assess our progress, test financial and operational assumptions, and confirm our priorities for 2030–2031. A full evaluation in 2031 will capture impact and lessons learnt to inform our next strategy.

Ultimately, the measure that matters most is whether more people in prison can access education that changes their lives. Everything in this strategy is directed towards that goal.

> Having PET funding is extremely helpful, especially for a sentenced prisoner who started out with no hope for the future! But now I have hope and ambition to continue to thrive, learn and survive. I can't thank you enough for the opportunity you have given me.
>
> – **A PET learner**

Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust,
The Foundry, 17 Oval Way,
London, SE11 5RR

020 3752 5680
info@prisonerseducation.org.uk
www.prisonerseducation.org.uk
Prisoners' Education Trust
@prisonersed.bsky.social
@PrisonersEd

If you would like to make a donation, please visit:
www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/donate

Registered charity No. 1084718 / Company limited by guarantee No. 4132595

Photos by Ian Cuthbert and Rebecca Radmore