

HMP Bedford

Prison education interim visit report

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Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

1. On 17 March 2020, all Ofsted routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out interim visits to prisons and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs). Interim visits aim to help prisoners, parents, employers and government understand how establishments are meeting the education and skills training needs of prisoners during this period, including prisoners with special educational needs and disabilities. They also help to identify what next steps are needed as prisons start to return to full education and skills programmes, taking into account the need to ensure safety throughout. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of prisoners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

Senior leaders and prison managers had a clear and ambitious vision for education, skills and work. They articulated a one organisation approach and believed that the regime in place prior to the COVID-19 restrictions was serving the needs of prisoners well.

Managers had endeavoured to provide a full curriculum throughout the pandemic. They spoke confidently about how they intended to return to a full regime of education, skills and work once restrictions allowed it.

Leaders recognised that the current regime did not meet the needs of the whole prison population. Only around a third of the prisoners accessed in-cell education. However, managers had been able to keep a good proportion of prisoners in their work roles in areas such as waste management, cleaning, litter picking, gardening and as COVID-19 mentors. In addition, managers had opened two additional workshops during the pandemic to supply food and packs which provided distraction activities for some prisoners.

At the start of the pandemic leaders suspended all teaching and training in line with national restrictions. However, they swiftly implemented in-cell education packs covering a wide range of subjects in the curriculum.

Managers had well-developed plans for moving from the current stage of total lockdown to the next stage when limited prisoner movement would be allowed. They had risk assessed all classrooms and workshops and had planned for groups with small numbers to start face-to-face learning. They had identified residents needing to revise for their functional skills tests and speakers of other languages who needed to practise their English speaking and listening skills as the priority groups.

Managers recognised that prisoners' education and skills induction and the provision of effective information, advice and guidance had been compromised at the start of the pandemic. Consequently, they introduced a comprehensive induction in-cell pack. However, these packs were not always well received, completed or returned in a timely manner. Managers felt that there was a need to return to deliver these services face-to-face as soon as the restrictions allowed it to happen.

The few prisoners we spoke with told us that they fully understood why formal education and the workshop activities had been suspended as a consequence of the pandemic and the imposed national restrictions. They thought that the current in-cell education offer was widely known across the prison and readily available to those who request a course. Prisoners told us that they found the work challenging and they benefited from useful feedback on their work, even though at times the feedback took a long time to reach them.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of prisoners?

The curriculum made available to prisoners throughout the restrictions imposed had a clear focus on helping prisoners improve their English and mathematics skills as a starting point. Prisoners had not had access to classes in education since March 2020. However, managers had ensured that most of the education curriculum was available to prisoners in the form of in-cell packs. New and additional subjects had been offered to prisoners during the period of the pandemic.

Managers and tutors had created in-cell education packs that were designed to meet the needs of individual prisoners. They had established an effective system for identifying the starting points of prisoners, including their level of English and mathematical skills, their prior work experience and qualifications, and their future career aspirations. Tutors used the information on prisoners' career aspirations, such as working in a warehouse, to design English and mathematics exercises based on this industry.

Tutors marked prisoners' work in a helpful way, pointing out errors and suggesting strategies for overcoming them, such as the use of dictionaries or taking more time to read the questions. Tutors' feedback routinely helped prisoners to improve their understanding of the subject. In mathematics, tutor feedback was not as helpful. For example, a prisoner who could not complete long division calculations correctly was not shown how to tackle this gap in their knowledge.

Leaders and managers had supported tutors in the development of in-cell education packs for prisoners. In addition, managers had provided tutors with professional development opportunities relevant to the different teaching methods required and tailored to their ability to provide content and feedback through remote education.

Despite the careful design of the education packs, and the dedication of tutors in marking and returning prisoners' work, less than a third of the current population requested the packs, a level that prison managers acknowledged was not high enough.

Next steps

Leaders should reintroduce formal education and work for prisoners as soon as possible; safely, considering smaller group sizes, and developing their planned blended learning approach.

Managers should increase the proportion of prisoners who engage with the in-cell education packs in preparation for prisoners participating in a blended learning approach when restrictions allow it.

Leaders and managers should re-introduce face-to-face induction and information advice and guidance sessions as soon as it is safe to do so and increase the proportion of prisoners who return their completed information, advice and guidance packs in the meantime.

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