

Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP Aylesbury

Dates of inspection: 2–12 February 2026

This part of the inspection was carried out by Ofsted inspectors using Ofsted's [Handbook for the inspection of education, skills and work activities in prisons and young offender institutions](#).

Ofsted inspects skills and work in custodial establishments as part of its further education and skills inspection activity. These inspections cover four areas: quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. The findings are presented in the order of the learner journey in the establishment. Together with the areas of concern, this is Ofsted's assessment of what the establishment does well and what it needs to do better.

Education, skills and work activities

Expected outcomes:

All prisoners are expected and enabled to engage in education, skills or work activities that promote personal development and employability. There are sufficient, suitable education, skills and work places to meet the needs of the population and provision is of a good standard.

Ofsted made the following assessments about the education, skills and work provision:

Overall effectiveness: Requires improvement

Quality of education: Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes: Requires improvement

Personal development: Requires Improvement

Leadership and management: Requires improvement

What does the prison do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders had a clear vision for their future education, skills and work (ESW) curriculum. However, the current curriculum did not meet the needs of enough prisoners by matching their interests or career aspirations. Many prisoners enrolled on courses to study qualifications that were not demanding enough and did not prepare them well enough for future training, or employment. Although improved from the previous inspection, where inspectors found provision to be inadequate, the quality of the ESW provision was not good enough.

Leaders had well-developed plans to implement a range of new provision to replace the previous vocational curriculum. Courses such as bricklaying, customer services, warehousing and industrial cleaning had closed as leaders deemed they were not financially viable. Leaders' current plans for a new barber shop, supermarket, café and art studio with a resident ceramicist were intended to mitigate those closures and provide a more stimulating, multi-purpose learning area for prisoners. However, at the time of the inspection, the provision was still months from opening.

Allocations were generally well managed and much improved since the previous inspection. Staff were swift at getting prisoners into an activity. A high proportion of prisoners were employed in full-time activities, with the remainder in part-time roles. Consequently, the proportion of prisoners who were unemployed was low. Those not employed were generally either new to the prison, unfit for work or suspended from activities. There were sufficient spaces for prisoners.

During induction, prisoners received suitable initial advice and guidance about the ESW opportunities available in the prison. However, the ongoing careers advice and guidance given to prisoners was not good enough. Information about employment pathways was confusing and not well enough related to prisoners' future career ambitions. Prisoners rightly reported that there was limited choice in both education and vocational training.

Leaders had made recent adjustments to the pay policy for prisoners, to incentivise them to attend education. They had, for instance, increased the rate of pay for attending mathematics and English training, which was now more than double the rate for wing cleaners. This had started to have a positive impact on the proportion of prisoners taking up education.

Leaders of the Prisoner Education Services (PES) provider, Milton Keynes College, were clear about the purpose of the education courses they provided for prisoners. They had designed a curriculum to primarily improve prisoners' English and mathematical skills and acquire qualifications that would support progression to further learning or work. PES leaders had implemented a limited range of additional education and vocational training courses, such as hospitality and catering, and barbering, which provided prisoners with opportunities to learn job-related skills.

In a few subjects, such as catering and hospitality, and business, training was of a high standard. Teachers designed activities to enthuse and motivate prisoners. Prisoners studying barbering quickly translated the theory they had learned about hairstyling techniques into practice on training heads. In English, teachers used short spelling tests incorporating visual diagram techniques, which helped prisoners to sequence and structure sentences effectively into paragraphs.

Teachers generally helped prisoners develop their English and mathematical skills well in vocational subjects. For example, in hospitality and catering, teachers demonstrated how to write menus and cooking instructions. In business, teachers showed prisoners how to develop convincing business plans and compose professional emails. Prisoners then applied what they had learned to their written work. However, in industries and work, trainers made too little use of opportunities to reinforce prisoners' English and mathematical skills, even when these opportunities were integral to tasks. For example, in woodwork, staff did not teach prisoners well enough how to calculate and measure angles.

The few prisoners who studied distance learning programmes received good-quality, ongoing support from their learning coordinator. Prisoners studied a wide range of subjects that met their individual interests, including A levels and bachelor's degrees. They worked well together in small study groups, or on their own in their cells. Prisoners had sufficient access to study materials, and a few had access to laptops to use for their learning. The virtual campus had been replaced with an online learning package that was in the process of being phased in.

Mostly, prisoners with an identified learning need received appropriate and helpful support in lessons. For example, staff used different reading aids to support prisoners with visual impairments, helping reduce fatigue during studies. However, support arrangements were often not implemented swiftly enough, and in a few instances prisoners waited months without the required support. This delayed learning for those prisoners.

The proportion of prisoners who started a course and achieved their qualification had declined over the previous two years. In the most recent reporting year, around three-quarters of prisoners who started a qualification went on to achieve it. Many prisoners passed functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics. However, too few progressed from entry-level English to the next level, and in mathematics the proportion who progressed from entry level was very low.

A small proportion of prisoners attended short, accredited practical training courses, such as rail track, roofing and labouring, which improved their employability skills. These courses were meaningful and provided prisoners with the opportunity to secure similar work on release. Most courses had embedded health and safety qualifications, and included vocational skills valued by employers, such as teamwork and working at height.

In industries, instructors generally used verbal instructions and demonstration well to train men. Prisoners produced items in woodwork such as coat pegs, which were of the expected standard. However, too many prisoners did not value the work given to them and were unclear what technical knowledge they were expected to learn. Many prisoners in industries were unaware of their progress because they were not set meaningful enough work targets or goals that helped them improve their work.

For too many prisoners, such as in the laundry, there was insufficient work to keep them fully occupied. Leaders rightly recognised that the proportion of wing workers was too high and had plans to reduce the number of prisoners employed as cleaners and barbers. However, at the time of the inspection, these plans had not yet come into effect.

Leaders had made concerted efforts to improve reading across the prison since the previous inspection. Improvements included the introduction of new reading areas and the purchase of more contemporary literature. However, too many prisoners who required support to improve their reading did not receive it. Prison-wide training for instructors and wing staff had been postponed. Consequently, staff did not promote reading well enough and prisoners reported that books, particularly on the wings, were not interesting or varied enough.

Training had been provided to education staff and for Shannon Trust mentors, who offered effective reading support. The few prisoners supported by Shannon Trust mentors benefited from reading for purposes such as creating 'Storybook Dads' recordings (see Glossary), and also improved their ability to read independently.

There was no training available for the very few prisoners with English as an additional language as leaders deemed that staffing such provision was not viable.

Attendance at ESW activities varied significantly. Although much improved in the past year, and compared with other category C prisons attendance was high, there were too many instances where only a few, or no, prisoners attended their planned education, vocational training or work activities. This was particularly the case in subjects such as English, mathematics, and health and safety. Leaders had introduced mini-moves part-way through sessions, to mitigate potential clashes with ESW and the prison regime. However, these conflicts still occurred and disrupted learning, particularly in education, when prisoners arrived either halfway through a lesson or had to leave early. In subjects such as business and catering, attendance was high.

In lessons and workshops, most prisoners behaved well. They were generally respectful and supportive of each other, as well as their teachers. For example, in hospitality and catering, prisoners were highly supportive when working at a fast pace to produce food to strict deadlines. Prisoners in mathematics classes were supportive of each other and were keen to help their peers solve increasingly complex mathematical equations.

Leaders had developed a suitable personal development curriculum for prisoners. They worked well with external organisations to provide targeted programmes that helped develop prisoners' resilience and well-being. For example, the work with Stoic and Forward Trust (see Glossary) offered workshop opportunities to help prisoners develop their reflective thinking, and engage in therapeutic discussions and counselling. Prisoners rightly reported that such activities were enlightening, or that family members found them to be more positive about the future when talking to them during visits.

Leaders had introduced many enrichment activities for prisoners, including sports competitions, theatre and music workshops, as well as religious celebratory events. On the wings, prisoners had access to board games, book corners and leisure activities, including pool tables. However, many prisoners that inspectors spoke to were unaware of the breadth of such opportunities or had not participated in them.

Most prisoners did not understand well enough the risks related to radicalisation and extremism. While staff did provide them with basic information about topics such as the 'Prevent' duty at induction, they did not revisit those topics sufficiently well.

At the time of the inspection, there were a few prisoners who had been cleared in readiness for a category D prison. There were no opportunities to be released on temporary licence at the prison. Those prisoners approved for open conditions were awaiting relocation to a resettlement prison as part of their planned next steps.

Priority concerns and key concerns

Priority concern

Leaders had not implemented a sufficiently broad or ambitious curriculum that met the needs or interests of all prisoners.

Key concerns

Leaders had not made sure that all work was sufficiently demanding or purposeful for prisoners. Too many prisoners did not value their work roles.

Too many prisoners did not attend the education, skills and work provision.

Teaching staff did not consistently revisit prisoners' learning on radicalisation and extremism, and most prisoners engaged in education did not understand the associated risks.