

Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP and YOI Portland

Last day of inspection: 29 January 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: Good

Quality of education: Good

Behaviour and attitudes: Good

Personal development: Good

Leadership and management: Good

The senior leadership team in education, skills and work (ESW) had developed very effective arrangements to monitor and continuously improve the quality and impact of the ESW provision. Their evaluations of the strengths and areas for improvement in ESW were accurate and their improvement actions timely. Leaders' monthly quality improvement group meetings led to effective specific, measurable and time-bound actions.

Leaders had rectified most of the concerns identified at the previous inspection. For example, the movement of prisoners to and from ESW was now efficient and most prisoners arrived at their activity punctually and engaged in it promptly. Prisoners' attendance at and engagement with ESW activities had improved substantially and were now good. Prisoners in ESW behaved well and were attentive. While pay rates for ESW were fair they did not clearly act either as an incentive or disincentive to engagement in ESW. Leaders had increased the number of activities and activity spaces to meet prisoners' learning needs. These spaces were mostly utilised well. Leaders had recruited new teachers in English and mathematics to tackle the high waiting lists for these subjects. The new teaching staff were joining the education team shortly after this inspection. However, there was no instructor available in construction and the course was not running. Prisoners' opportunities for structured skills development through work in industries had mostly improved but in a few areas, the main kitchen for example, instructors were not co-ordinating learning opportunities skilfully.

Leaders had expanded the provision by introducing three new learning pathways and related curriculums which built on prisoners' prior experiences of learning or work. One pathway enabled prisoners to learn new technical and vocational skills and gain vocational qualifications. A second focused on teaching prisoners 'green' and sustainable skills and a third, mostly for younger adults, promoted their personal and social development. Most prisoners understood how they could use the new personal and vocational skills they were learning in life and work.

Leaders had built useful relationships with external training organisations which helped develop prisoners' employability skills. They were developing effective working partnerships with employers, for example in waste management, hospitality, facilities management and logistics. Leaders were using the insights and experience of these employers well to shape the structure and content of the new curriculums. This ensured that prisoners learned the professional, vocational and personal skills they needed and which employers valued. Leaders were actively seeking additional employer partnerships, including with local employers in the engineering and construction sectors. Leaders had reached an agreement with a hospitality employer based in the south west of England to build and equip a hospitality training centre to be based at the prison.

Prisoners had good opportunities to use secure, non-networked laptops for self-learning. Prisoners and staff also used the Virtual Campus to research information and conduct job searches. A few prisoners were following distance learning programmes, including with the Open University, and most were adequately supported in and resourced for their studies.

Managers from different departments ran a useful job fair each week for prisoners newly inducted to the prison. The fair highlighted the purposeful activities and services that were available. During induction, prisoners completed basic online training in health and safety and food hygiene that helped to prepare them for life on their wings.

At the induction stage, careers staff provided prisoners with effective initial information, advice and guidance and set them clear learning goals. Prisoners had a clear understanding of the ESW options available to support them in prison and on release. However, there was a backlog of prisoners waiting to complete the induction phase. During the inspection, leaders sought and secured additional advisor staff to reduce this backlog.

Managers had developed an effective allocations process to activities which was informed by accurate information and administered efficiently. Most prisoners were allocated to or waiting to attend some form of ESW activity that related to their agreed learning pathway.

Since taking over the PES contract in October 2025, Milton Keynes College managers had mostly overcome a number of challenges, including replacing a large number of existing staff who chose to be made redundant at the time. The provision was now resourced and managed well. The academic and vocational courses offered were ambitious and met most prisoners' needs, including in English and mathematics. Teaching was mostly effective and the range of accredited academic curriculums provided at Levels 1, 2 and 3 built prisoners' skills and knowledge progressively. The vocational courses were generally well-resourced, particularly in horticulture, skills for work and carpentry. The college's team of experienced teachers and instructors in industries were supported well by specialists in neurodiversity to meet prisoners' additional needs which helped them make good progress. Most prisoners were learning new skills and becoming better placed to improve their lives and prospects in the future.

Teachers in education mostly used a good range of teaching methods effectively. These included recaps, questioning, teacher-led and group discussion and classroom support from mentors. However, in a small minority of sessions, teachers did not routinely check prisoners' understanding before moving on to the next subject.

Prisoners' achievement of the accredited and non-accredited qualifications available was generally high. Prisoners declaring needs relating to neurodiversity achieved as well as their peers. An increasing number of the prisoners participating in employer-sponsored environments or activities in the prison were gaining useful employability and/or interview experience. In a few cases, such as for those who studied the Railtrack course, prisoners secured employment on release.

Leaders and managers had developed and maintained a calm environment throughout education, skills and work. Prisoners attending ESW were respectful and demonstrated positive relationships with their peers, tutors, instructors and prison staff. Prisoners in ESW behaved well, with minimal examples of inappropriate behaviour or poor language. Prisoners said they felt safe within ESW and did not experience bullying, harassment or threatening behaviours. Instructors did not always challenge any instances of poor punctuality.

Young adult prisoners between 18 and 25 years old who were located on the creating future opportunities (CFO) wing and workshop, were positive about how the CFO programme supported their needs and provided them with skills that could help them on release. Most could identify how attending the programme had helped support their social interaction skills and was preparing them for transition to life outside the prison. These younger adult prisoners shared how staff offered effective support and coaching in practical life skills, such as growing food, budgeting and healthy eating.

Teaching staff celebrated equality of opportunity and diversity, which helped foster an inclusive environment where prisoners developed an understanding of individual characteristics and respect for others' beliefs and lifestyles. Induction staff introduced topics such as life in modern Britain and how to recognise extremist views during the induction to ESW. However, many prisoners did not have a deep understanding of how these topics had relevance to their lives in or outside prison.

Leaders had introduced a wide range of enrichment activities offered in the library or gym. Specific gym sessions were scheduled for those with physical or medical needs so they could access the gym safely. Leaders had developed a sports academy offering health, wellbeing and fitness activities including rugby, football, volleyball, hockey and tennis.

Leaders and managers had implemented an effective reading strategy. Prisoners with poor literacy skills received effective coaching from Shannon Trust mentors on the wings. Prisoners were encouraged to read for pleasure in the wings and during work breaks in industries. Prisoners took part in reading challenges. Instructors in industries set useful English skills-related targets as part of prisoners' progress-in-work reviews. This helped prisoners understand how English is an integral skill for employment.

Leaders paid close attention to monitoring and managing the workload of ESW staff, and staff had good access to wellbeing support and professional development.

Concerns

- Leaders should reduce the backlog in careers advice and guidance assessments to increase the flow of prisoners allocated to education, skills and work.
- Leaders should ensure that all prisoners in industries experience a structured and developmental programme of work-related learning.

Notable positive practice

1. Senior leaders placed a very high emphasis on continuous improvement using very effective quality improvement arrangements. Leaders conducted a thorough evaluation of the strengths and areas for improvement of each aspect of ESW every month. These evaluations set the agenda for leaders' monthly quality improvement group meetings and led to effective specific, measurable and time-bound improvement actions. Leaders charted the progress of each action month-by-month, recording a clear narrative of how well improvement was taking place and detailing any additional actions that were required.
2. Leaders' positive working relationships with employers meant that most curriculums reflected real-world content and working practices. This meant

that prisoners learned about relevant employment skills valued by employers. Managers were actively filling gaps in these relationships, for example building new links with employers in engineering and construction trades.