

Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP and YOI Downview

Last day of inspection: 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: Good

Quality of education: Good

Behaviour and attitudes: Good

Personal development: Good

Leadership and management: Good

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

Leaders had rectified the concerns raised at the previous inspection. They had ensured that women received helpful advice and guidance when choosing their education, skills and work activities. Staff mostly provided high-quality feedback to help women improve their work. They provided individual help and support to women so that they could catch up on any lost learning.

Leaders provided sufficient purposeful activities spaces for women to join education courses and develop their skills. Staff allocated spaces thoughtfully, matching activities to women's individual interests and potential employment routes. Almost all activity spaces were allocated and most women attended on a full-time basis.

Leaders provided a broad employment-focused curriculum, designed for women to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they needed to secure work both before and after release. Leaders had carefully curated a series of pathways for women to follow that covered a wide range of sectors including retail and business enterprise, as well as practical skills such as gardening and sustainability. Most women had not had a job before entering custody so staff taught non-accredited preparatory courses for women to build their confidence and self-esteem before taking on further training. Leaders included a comprehensive selection of accredited courses to deepen women's knowledge and skills and build their CV for employment on release. Leaders had responded quickly to changing population needs, creating a bespoke pathway for women on approaching release that helped them to build employability skills rapidly and gain qualifications for use on release.

Leaders used the Virtual Campus well to meet the needs of women who wanted to study courses not offered at the prison. Women studied distance learning courses such as mental health awareness, leadership and managing risk. Many women were studying degree level courses with the Open University in subjects such as mathematics, psychology and counselling. Staff supported women on distance learning courses well. Teachers met with women frequently to check on their progress and provide additional support where required.

Leaders provided women with an effective induction that helped them to make informed choices about what to apply for in the prison. Staff provided a useful overview of the education and work options open to women during the first two weeks of their stay. Careers staff met with women individually to further explore their options. Staff used the information gathered in these discussions to allocate women promptly to their chosen pathways. Peer mentors skilfully supported the work of prison staff, using their knowledge and understanding of prison life, to help women choose suitable jobs while in custody.

Leaders had implemented a sensible pay policy that incentivised education activities and rewarded achievement of key milestones. For example, women received bonus payments for achieving qualifications and for reaching different stages on the Shannon Trust reading programme. Women enjoyed their activities and were well motivated to learn.

Milton Keynes College delivered education and some vocational training in the prison. Suitably qualified and experienced teachers planned the content of subject areas well and sequenced the curriculums logically. They identified women's starting points thoroughly on arrival and used this information well to assess the progress that women made. Women developed many new and useful skills, such as using woodworking tools in the upcycling workshop and lash and brow treatments in beauty therapy.

Teachers of subjects such as English, mathematics and beauty therapy presented information in lessons effectively. They used helpful strategies and resources to support the development of women's skills. For example, in English for speakers of other languages, teachers referred to commonly paired letters they had previously taught to help women decode unfamiliar words. Teachers encouraged women to develop subject-specific terminology such as the difference between a protagonist and an antagonist when exploring story writing in English classes.

Teachers typically set useful targets so that women could clearly see what they needed to do to make progress throughout their courses. For example, teachers tasked women with writing second drafts of their work or correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar errors. However, in a few work areas, such as gardens, wing work and waste management, staff did not consistently assess, review or track women's progress from their starting points. As a result, a minority of women did not know the progress they were making and what they needed to do to achieve their next steps.

Leaders worked well with the employer advisory board to nurture existing employer links and develop new opportunities. They used partnerships with external organisations, including the London College of Fashion, Max Spiellman and The Clink, to provide women with experience of working in industry settings and commercial kitchens. These projects included working to briefs set by employers that built women's portfolios of work and taught them meaningful practical and vocational skills. Training was strongly employment-focused, enabling women to build skills, such as pattern making and catering for events, that they could use both on release on temporary licence (ROTL) and future work.

Most women completed their courses. In accredited courses, such as functional skills English, almost all women achieved their qualifications. Leaders recognised that the previous year's functional skills mathematics achievements were not sufficiently high and took swift action to improve this. They identified that women had not understood the wording of questions well enough to be able to demonstrate their mathematical skills and added essential vocabulary and literacy to the curriculum. Achievement of mathematics qualifications had since improved markedly and pass rates were high at the time of the inspection.

Staff promptly identified women who required additional support to overcome challenges associated with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Staff provided teachers, trainers and instructors with helpful support strategies and ensured that classrooms were well equipped with learning aids. Women routinely used fidget tools, reading rulers and ear defenders in lessons. Staff set appropriate tasks where necessary, such as quieter areas to sweep when working in the gardens. Women with SEND achieved at least as well as their peers, and notably better than their peers in functional skills English courses.

Leaders had implemented an effective whole establishment reading strategy. Staff identified women's gaps in reading within their first few days in custody and used this information well to signpost them to additional support through the Shannon Trust and education courses. Women accessed early reader and foreign language books through the library and spoke positively about the range of reading material available. Leaders had provided inspirational training to the wider prison staff on the importance of identifying and supporting women with low-level literacy skills. This was beginning to have an impact such as staff encouraging women to seek further reading support. However, leaders recognised they needed to improve book choice and presentation in areas such as workshops and residential units.

Leaders accurately evaluated the strengths and areas for improvement in education, skills and work. They met frequently with leaders across the prison and worked closely with their colleagues to drive improvements in provision. These included a change of approach in wing cleaning so that women's starting points and progress through their training were assessed effectively and moving the recycling workshop to a purpose-built facility, replicating employer premises and further preparing women for employment on release.

Women attended their lessons and work activities well. Leaders routinely monitored attendance and removed most barriers to women attending, such as clashes with healthcare appointments. Leaders had introduced a movements officer to follow up any non-attendance on a live basis and encourage women to go to their activities. Women were mostly punctual to their lessons and work activities.

Teachers, trainers and instructors nurtured caring and supportive working relationships with women. They created calm and productive learning environments where women were able to focus on the topics they understood the least. Women conducted themselves well, were respectful of others and calmly discussed differing views and opinions. Women had developed positive attitudes towards their work and took pride in their achievements.

Leaders' relentless focus on employment-focused activities raised women's aspirations for employment and their lives on release. Through the activities they took part in, women improved their self-confidence and ability to identify new opportunities for employment. For example, women studying textiles in the London College of Fashion workshop planned to use their newly acquired skills to develop new businesses in clothing alterations and design.

Staff taught women how to spot the signs of radicalisation and extremism risks as part of induction. The dangers of radicalisation and extremism were further embedded within education classes and staff had received specific training to identify issues of concern. However, this was not reinforced sufficiently well so that women could recall fluently how to spot the signs in themselves and others.

Despite some excellent opportunities for ROTL, only two women were accessing ROTL for employment at the time of the inspection. Others who had been granted ROTL previously had made good progress and secured employment on release. Leaders hosted frequent employer engagement events where employers met with women and explored employment opportunities. These included many successful interviews for women who secured offers of work on release.

Concerns:

Women working on wings and in industries did not receive meaningful targets that were relevant to their work and helped them to make the progress they are capable of.

Staff did not reinforce the signs of radicalisation and extremism risks with women sufficiently well so that they could recall them fluently and recognise the signs in themselves and others.