

Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP Risley

Dates of inspection: 18 May to 21 May 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: Good

Personal development: Requires Improvement

Leadership and management: Requires Improvement

Leaders had implemented effective quality assurance and improvement arrangements that helped them to rectify most of the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. The quality of education that prisoners received had improved. Leaders had ensured that prisoners received appropriate advice and guidance when choosing their education, skills and work (ESW) activities. Leaders had increased the number of spaces available in ESW. However, there were still insufficient activity spaces for the population. Instructors mostly provided appropriate tasks to prisoners to develop the skills that they needed to gain employment.

Leaders had not put in place a sufficiently ambitious curriculum across industries. Around half of the industry workshops had prisoners completing low-level tasks with work that was mundane. Prisoners did not have the opportunity to achieve qualifications linked to their chosen industry. Leaders were in the process of exploring additional courses that could support prisoners achieve their aspirations, but at the time of the inspection these plans were not in place.

Leaders had begun to form new relationships with key stakeholders, because of the prison population changing to prisoners convicted of sex offences. They rightly acknowledged that there was further work to do to engage employers that would provide employment support for the change in population. Leaders did offer employment pathways in construction, laundry and warehousing. They worked with a limited number of employers in these sectors that provided job vacancies and supported prisoners with mock interviews in preparation for their release.

Leaders and managers had developed a curriculum offer in education and vocational training that mostly met prisoners' and regional skills needs. They provided prisoners with employability skills to support them to secure paid employment upon release. For example,

leaders had recently introduced self-employment courses and provided pathways into construction. They offered a range of online development courses to prisoners in areas such as food hygiene, customer service and health and safety. However, too few prisoners engaged with this learning.

On arrival, prisoners received effective information, advice and guidance that helped them to make informed choices about their short- and longer-term goals linked to their planned employment upon release. They were allocated swiftly to activity places. However, staff did not take prisoners' sentence plans into account. This meant that in a very few instances, prisoners did not access activities that were appropriate for their future progression.

Leaders had designed a pay policy that was fair and equitable, with education rates aligned to other roles. Leaders used higher pay appropriately to recognise trusted roles such as red bands.

Leaders ensured that most prisoners received an appropriate special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) screening on arrival at the prison. Specialist staff carried out further in-depth assessments with prisoners, and identified appropriate strategies and resources to help prisoners with SEND to succeed. For instance, prisoners received reading pens, coloured overlays and ear defenders. However, in industries a small minority of staff were unaware of how to support the individual needs of prisoners effectively.

Novus delivered education and vocational training qualifications in the prison. They had put in place suitable curriculums that met the needs of most prisoners. Teachers carried out assessments to identify accurately what prisoners already knew and could do. They used this information to plan their teaching and monitor closely the progress that prisoners made. Teachers planned curriculums in a sensible order so that prisoners built their knowledge and skills incrementally. For example, prisoners studying English for speakers of other languages learned how to recognise simple words before using them to construct phrases that enabled them to have short conversations. Most prisoners made at least expected progress and those that remained on their courses achieved their qualifications.

In education, prisoners benefited from effective support from their peer mentors. Mentors were appropriately trained. Managers trained peer mentors in phonics so that they had the skills to help their peers with their English and reading. Mentors were highly thought of by prisoners, and they appreciated the support that mentors provided to improve their English and mathematical skills.

Most teachers used a range of effective teaching strategies. These included useful questioning, discussions and practical demonstrations. They explained topics clearly and revisited these to ensure that prisoners could recall previous learning. However, in a very few lessons teachers did not use effective teaching strategies. They did not explain topics well, which meant that prisoners could not recall previous learning.

Teachers and instructors used assessment effectively. Teachers used quizzes and group activities to check prisoners' knowledge. Instructors tracked prisoners' development of skills for employment by setting targets that focused on developing and improving prisoners' skills. Instructors monitored the progress that prisoners made towards achieving their targets.

However, in too many cases the targets set were too broad. This meant that prisoners did not develop their skills as quickly as they could.

In education and vocational training, teachers provided effective feedback to prisoners. In most cases, prisoners acted on this feedback and improved their written and practical work. In construction, prisoners used oral feedback from teachers to correct their scale drawings, wood joints and floor laying.

Most teachers and instructors were suitably qualified and experienced to teach and instruct in their subject areas. They completed training to maintain the currency of their subject knowledge. A few teachers benefited from targeted support to improve their teaching skills to meet the expected standard. However, there was limited training provided by managers to help all teachers strengthen their teaching skills further. Instructors did not benefit from training to improve their practice.

Leaders had implemented an appropriate reading strategy across the prison. They had established reading books in workshops and on the wings to encourage reading for pleasure. In laundry and waste management, prisoners took the opportunity to read whilst waiting for the machines to complete their cycle. Leaders trained peer mentors to support prisoners to learn to read. Leaders had worked closely with the Shannon Trust to train staff to support emerging and low-level readers to develop the confidence to read. Prisoners made progress in their reading skills which helped them to go on to study qualifications in English.

Prisoners' attendance to education skills and work was high. Prisoners were enthusiastic about their learning and participated well in workshops and lessons. They were motivated to go on to higher level qualifications or more skilled work. In the more ambitious industry workshops prisoners valued the progression opportunities that required them to use higher level skills. They were motivated to develop their skills swiftly so that they could progress to the more complex tasks. In industries, prisoners were proud to showcase their skills to those new to the workshops.

Teachers and instructors created calm and well-ordered learning and work environments. Teachers and instructors set clear expectations for behaviour that promoted productive and professional behaviours. Prisoners were polite and respectful to their peers and staff. Prisoners in industry workshops enthusiastically explained how they had developed tolerance and respect through their work. Prisoners felt safe in classrooms and workshops.

Leaders had put in place a personal development curriculum in education that increased prisoners' confidence and supported them with their health and wellbeing. Prisoners had accessed online courses on topics such as sleeping well, managing emotions and developing their self-esteem. They took part in monthly walk and talks, and a few played in the Risley band. Prisoners valued the positive impact that attending education, skills and work activities had on developing their teamwork and communication skills. However, prisoners in industries and work did not have the same activities available to them as those taught in education.

Prisoners in education and vocational training developed an understanding of fundamental British values and the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. Teachers reinforced this learning on induction to education classes as well as through discussions as part of the 'more for you' programme. However, Instructors did not routinely reinforce these topics to

deepen all prisoners' understanding of how these impacted them in their daily lives. This meant that prisoners in industry did not have a deep enough understanding of how to keep themselves safe from the risks of radicalisation or extremist views, or fundamental British values.

Prisoners due for release who were identified as job ready were prepared well. They received relevant information from the resettlement and employment hub that helped them to understand the job opportunities available to them on release. However, the opportunities for prisoners to go on to employment were limited due to the nature of their conviction. Too few prisoners were employed on release.

Prisoners in education had access to the Virtual Campus. However, this was not used effectively. Staff did not help prisoners to carry out job searches or create CVs. Those prisoners that were not in education could not access this resource.

Key concerns

Leaders had not developed a sufficiently ambitious curriculum for prisoners in industries.

Leaders had not ensured that there were sufficient activity spaces for the prison population.

Leaders had not ensured that prisoners in industries had sufficient access to a curriculum to support them in their wider development.