

Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP and YOI High Down

Dates of inspection: 8 – 11 June 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 and managers were passionate about providing prisoners with a range of opportunities to develop skills that would help them secure employment upon release. They had created a number of education, skills, and work pathways that included the construction and hospitality industries, from entry level to level 2. They grouped courses, such as brickwork, plastering, drylining and painting and decorating, into coherent programmes of study. Through the barista pathway, prisoners learned to make a variety of coffees and repair commercial coffee machines. This enabled prisoners to gain skills and experience in interrelated topics, which helped them secure work upon release.

Leaders and managers had provided enough activity spaces to occupy prisoners fully on either a full- or part-time basis. They had provided vulnerable prisoners with equitable access to activities. The allocations process was mostly effective, but staff did not notify the allocations team swiftly enough when prisoners were approaching the end of their courses. This meant that there were waiting lists and prisoners were not always aware of when their next course was due to start. This resulted in frustration amongst prisoners.

Leaders and managers had reduced the number of work activities available to prisoners on residential units. They had ensured that any prisoner who wanted to work in the residential units had completed the necessary training. This encouraged prisoners to participate in education, skills, and work activities, and as a result, all cleaners and painters were trained before being employed on the wings.

Prisoners' attendance at activities was improving but remained too low. This was because, too often, prison officers on the residential units did not challenge prisoners on why they were not attending activities. Prisoners who attended education, skills and work activities achieved their intended qualification.

Leaders and managers provided prisoners with a helpful induction into education, skills, and work. Most prisoners attended their induction; however, when they did not attend, staff promptly rebooked them. This caused delays for other prisoners who had arrived at the prison in getting a place on the induction. Where prisoners had attended, they had a good understanding of the range of opportunities available to them.

Tutors and workshop instructors used the information they had on prisoners' prior learning or previous job roles to plan lessons and activities effectively. This contributed to prisoners enjoying their time in education, skills and work, and learning new skills.

Instructors in industries and workshops had not routinely identified with prisoners the skills they needed to develop, such as teamwork or following instructions. Where instructors did set targets, these were often too vague to be helpful to prisoners in knowing what skills they should develop further. Consequently, prisoners did not have a record of what skills they developed.

The Prison Education Service (PES) provider, People Plus, had worked effectively with prison leaders to develop an effective curriculum that equipped prisoners with skills to help them upon release. This included English and mathematics courses for those who needed to improve their skills in these areas. Leaders and managers from the prison and the PES provider had prioritised English and mathematics for all prisoners who needed to achieve them. While unpopular with many prisoners, those who joined these courses found them useful and were proud to achieve their qualifications. As a result, the recommendations from the previous inspection had been partially achieved.

Staff carefully planned and taught lessons that actively involved prisoners. Most tutors provided prisoners with sufficient time to discuss topics and practise new concepts individually and in small groups. In better lessons, tutors used questioning and assessments effectively to check what prisoners knew and to build on their knowledge. However, this was not consistently done across all lessons. Consequently, in too many lessons, the teaching was too inconsistent.

Staff teaching vocational subjects helped prisoners to develop their understanding of technical terms. In barbering lessons, prisoners used the correct terminology when discussing different types of hair with the tutor.

Most tutors and instructors provided verbal feedback on prisoners' work, which helped them to understand where they had gone wrong. For example, in drylining, instructors provided

helpful feedback on prisoners' skimming techniques, offering encouragement and praise, which helped prisoners improve.

Prisoners working in industries or workshops, including gardens and recycling, were unable to gain recognition for the skills and knowledge they gained. Consequently, when prisoners were released, they had no record of the skills they had developed.

Staff used laptops effectively with prisoners so that they could continue with their learning. Prisoners on distance learning courses valued being able to use the Virtual Campus to complete their assignments.

Leaders and managers had been proactive in ensuring that prisoners were able to read for pleasure. There was now a greater emphasis on reading within the prison. Tutors in education had received training from the National Literacy Trust, which helped them gain confidence in supporting prisoners to read. Leaders had provided prisoners with a range of reading books in the residential units.

Prisoners received suitable information, advice and guidance while in prison. Prisoners benefited from discussions regarding possible careers, both within the prison and on release. Just before prisoners were due for release, they were supported to gain employment. Prisoners who had completed the Railtrack course were particularly successful in gaining employment upon release.

At induction, staff accurately identified prisoners who had additional support needs. They put support plans in place where needed, and tutors and workshop instructors were aware of how to support prisoners. However, prisoners did not receive the same level of support when they were in the residential units.

Prisoners in education and industries did not have a good enough understanding of fundamental British values. This was because staff did not discuss these topics with prisoners.

Staff had created a calm, productive and professional working environment. They did this by setting clear expectations for prisoners' behaviours. For example, in the textiles workshop, the demands to meet production targets helped to focus prisoners on the work that needed to be completed.

Prisoners had a positive approach to learning when they took part in activities. Most wanted to attend classes, as they understood the value of participating in learning. However, the frequent cancellation of activities created frustration, which resulted in reduced motivation among prisoners.

Leaders and managers had implemented a pay policy which was effective in incentivising prisoners to continue in education and progress on to higher levels of learning.

Prisoners in the needlework class produced work to a standard where they frequently received commissions. Prisoners found that completing the needlework in their cells helped them to maintain a positive mental wellbeing.

Leaders and managers had provided prisoners with a wide range of activities that helped them to explore their interests and hobbies. This included sessions where prisoners engaged in board games, attended monthly film club, and participated in art and craft activities supported by peer mentors. Specific fitness sessions were offered, which included Park Runs around the all-weather pitch and sessions for prisoners aged over 50 and those with physical disabilities.

What does the prison need to do to improve?

Concern

Prisoners' attendance at education, skills and work was too low.

Concern

Staff did not routinely provide prisoners with feedback that they could revisit after they had finished that particular session.

Concern

Prisoners did not have a good enough understanding of British Values and their relevance.