Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP and YOI Deerbolt

Dates of inspection: 17 to 20 August 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

Leaders had made progress in improving education, skills and work since the previous inspection. They had broadened the curriculum, strengthened careers guidance and employer engagement and improved their oversight of provision. Quality assurance activities identified appropriate priorities for improvement and informed staff development. Leaders had a clearer understanding of the weaknesses that remained. However, they did not evaluate the effectiveness and capacity of provision or the impact of their actions on prisoners' participation, progress and achievement precisely.

Leaders had provided broadly sufficient education, skills and work places for the prison population, although too many were part-time. This restricted the amount of purposeful activity available to prisoners. Leaders did not have an accurate enough understanding of how well available spaces were used or whether provision met the needs of different groups of prisoners.

Leaders had developed the curriculum appropriately in response to prisoners identified needs and local and regional employment opportunities. They had broadened vocational and employability provision, including new bricklaying training and an Employer Gateway that provided access to industry certification in areas such as insulation and traffic management. These opportunities reflected employment sectors in the region, particularly construction. Leaders had also adapted aspects of the curriculum for the increasingly diverse prison population. For example, young adults transferring from the youth estate were supported through a structured nine-

week transition programme that introduced them to adult custody, education, skills and work opportunities and support services. Prisoners in segregation could continue learning by using digital resources.

Leaders had not ensured that the curriculum provided sufficiently ambitious progression opportunities for all prisoners. Prisoners serving longer sentences and those with higher prior attainment had too few opportunities to extend and apply their existing knowledge and skills or to develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours that prepared them well for release and employment.

Careers staff helped prisoners identify their learning, employment and training aspirations and understand what they needed to do to achieve them. Careers staff considered prisoners' previous experience and career aspirations when they developed and subsequently reviewed these plans.

Leaders used the Employment Advisory Board effectively to strengthen links with employers and increase prisoners' awareness of employment opportunities on release. Board members brought relevant business expertise and provided constructive challenge to leaders about the prison's employment and skills provision. Partnerships with employers provided prisoners with opportunities to learn about different career routes, prepare CVs, practise interview skills and engage directly with potential employers. A prisoner representative contributed to the board, ensuring that prisoners' experiences informed its work. As a result, prisoners were better informed about employment opportunities and better prepared to seek work on release.

Leaders had improved arrangements for allocating prisoners to education, skills and work, and these were now broadly effective. Attendance had increased since the previous inspection. However, attendance remained too low. Cancelled sessions, clashes with other activities and appointments and late movement reduced the time prisoners spent learning and working. Too many prisoners therefore lost valuable time in which they could have developed their knowledge and skills or made a meaningful contribution through prison work. The prisoner pay policy provided little incentive for prisoners to choose education because differences in pay between education and other activities were small.

Novus provided education and vocational training at the prison. Managers and teachers planned programmes intended to develop prisoners' knowledge and skills from their starting points and support their progression. Teachers and vocational tutors had appropriate subject and industry expertise. Prisoners made good progress in the majority of lessons, often from low starting points, producing high standards of work in digital and enterprise joinery. A teachers and tutors had not developed the teaching skills they needed quickly enough. As a result, they did not always identify prisoners' understanding accurately, adapt learning appropriately or establish the depth of knowledge and skills prisoners had developed.

Teachers did not consistently use assessment effectively to identify what prisoners knew and understood. In a few lessons, they did not identify accurately enough when prisoners needed further support. Teachers did not consistently use questioning to identify misconceptions or establish the depth of prisoners' understanding. Prisoners in some English and mathematics classes did not make progress as quickly as they could because teaching did not always take sufficient account of their different levels and stages of learning.

Prisoners in industries and work developed useful practical skills and positive workplace behaviours. They worked effectively with others, took responsibility for tasks and followed routines that reflected expectations in employment. Functional skills outreach provision enabled some prisoners working in industries to improve their English and mathematics, although too few took part.

Instructors did not consistently establish prisoners' starting points or record the knowledge, skills and behaviours they had developed. Consequently, some prisoners were unclear about the progress they had made or what they needed to improve next.

Leaders' actions to improve functional skills provision had resulted in better outcomes for prisoners. However, too many prisoners remained on courses beyond their planned end dates or withdrew before completing their learning.

Prisoners with identified additional learning and support needs were supported effectively in education and most industries. Staff made appropriate adjustments that helped prisoners participate and make progress alongside their peers. Prisoners working on residential wings and in some prison work did not receive structured support for their additional learning and support needs. The prolonged absence of a neurodiversity support manager meant that this support was not coordinated consistently across the prison.

Leaders had developed their approach to promoting reading across the prison. However, the strategy was not embedded consistently across all education, skills and work settings. Staff development had increased staff awareness of the importance of reading and staff from a range of roles promoted reading and volunteered as reading buddies. Prisoners benefited from Shannon Trust mentoring, reading journals and initiatives such as Storybook Dads that enabled them to use reading to maintain relationships with their families. These activities helped prisoners develop their skills, confidence and enjoyment of reading. Outreach support and access to reading materials enabled some prisoners who could not routinely visit the library to take part in reading activities. Reading was less well promoted in some industries and work areas and leaders did not analyse participation sufficiently well to identify which prisoners were not accessing the opportunities available.

Prisoners behaved appropriately and engaged positively in education, skills and work. They were respectful towards staff and each other, worked cooperatively with their peers and took pride in their work. In industries, prisoners worked safely, followed appropriate working practices and developed behaviours that reflected expectations in employment. Staff did not consistently reinforce expected standards of behaviour on residential wings and in some work areas.

Prisoners who took part in enrichment and personal development activities, including art, model making, chess and community projects developed confidence, social skills and wider interests. A few prisoners involved in the Bowes museum project applied their English skills to analyse and exhibit artefacts. Peer mentors supported other prisoners in areas such as induction, careers and reading, while developing their own communication and leadership skills. Some gained nationally recognised mentoring qualifications. Progress coaches supported some prisoners who were reluctant to engage in formal education through outreach and small-group activities, heling them to develop their confidence and wider skills.

Leaders had not provided sufficient opportunities for prisoners to develop practical life skills to prepare for greater independence and release. Prisoners identified gaps in areas such as cooking, money management, healthy living and understanding the safe use of mobile technologies. This limited how well some prisoners were prepared for the practical demands of life after release.

Prisoners had too few opportunities to develop the digital skills they needed for employment and daily life. Leaders had begun to introduce Coracle laptops, but their use to support education, skills and work was not yet fully established. Computers in some learning areas, including employability, were frequently unavailable or did not work. As a result, prisoners were not prepared well enough to use digital technology safely and confidently for work and everyday life after release.

Leaders promoted equality and diversity appropriately through education, skills and work. Staff introduced community values during induction and, through education, developed prisoners' understanding of themes such as mutual respect, tolerance and the rule of law. Prisoners demonstrated these values in their interactions with staff and each other, although their understanding of how these applied to their wider lives was less well developed in some industries.

Priority concerns and key concerns

Priority concern

Leaders had not used information sufficiently well to develop an accurate and analytical understanding of the capacity and effectiveness of education, skills and work or the impact of their actions on prisoners' participation, progress and achievement.

Key concerns

Leaders had not ensured that the curriculum provided all prisoners with sufficiently ambitious opportunities to build on their prior knowledge and skills and continue to develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours.

Leaders had not secured sufficiently high attendance at education, skills and work or reduced the disruption to prisoners' learning.

Leaders had not ensured that teaching, training and assessment consistently took account of prisoners' starting points or enabled them to understand the progress they were making.

Notable positive practice (NPP)

Leaders had developed a dedicated transition programme for young adults transferring from the youth estate.

The Employment Advisory Board brought together employers, prison leaders and a prisoner representative to shape employment and skills provision and strengthen opportunities for prisoners to prepare for work on release.