

HMP Bedford

Ofsted report for education, skills and work activities

Unique Reference Number:	52248
Inspection type:	Full inspection
Last day of inspection:	6 August 2026
Type of establishment:	Category B
Establishment nominee contact:	Jenny Norfolk
Establishment address:	St Loyes Street Bedford Bedfordshire MK40 1HG
Telephone number:	01234 373000

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.

This part of the inspection is conducted and written by Ofsted inspectors using Ofsted's inspection framework, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>.

Ofsted inspects the provision of education, skills and work in custodial establishments using the same inspection framework and methodology it applies to further education and skills provision in the wider community. This covers 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 key concerns and recommendations, provided in the summary section of this report, this constitutes Ofsted's assessment of what the establishment does well and what it needs to do better.

Ofsted made the following assessments about the education, skills and work provision:

Overall effectiveness: Inadequate

Quality of education: Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes: Inadequate

Personal development: Requires improvement

Leadership and management: Requires improvement

Leaders had not secured sufficient improvement in education, skills and work. Significant weaknesses remained in prisoners' timely access to activities, attendance, the breadth and ambition of the curriculum and the quality of teaching, training and assessment. Recently appointed leaders had improved partnership working and quality assurance, giving them a clearer understanding of these weaknesses. They had strengthened their oversight of PeoplePlus, the prison education service (PES) provider, and held education managers more closely to account. Leaders had also developed well-considered plans to broaden vocational opportunities and recognise the skills prisoners developed through work. However, much of this work was recent and had not yet resulted in consistently effective provision for prisoners.

Although leaders provided sufficient education, skills and work activity spaces for the prison population, low attendance meant that too many prisoners did not benefit from the activities to which they were allocated. The range of activities on offer did

not enable enough prisoners to develop practical employability skills. Prisoners working in the industrial kitchen gained experience that reflected industry practice and used a wide range of industrial equipment. In contrast, many other work roles did not provide similarly structured opportunities to develop new skills.

Too many prisoners did not access education, skills and work early enough. This reduced the time available for them to develop knowledge and skills, gain work experience and make meaningful progress before transfer or release. Leaders had improved their tracking of prisoners through induction and allocation but did not evaluate the whole journey well enough to identify and resolve delays promptly. Delays in induction and assessment also meant that too many prisoners did not receive careers guidance or a learning and work plan early enough to inform their education, skills and work choices.

Careers staff enabled prisoners to identify employment aspirations, consider suitable education and training options, and access relevant support. Employer and resettlement events involving construction employers and the Department for Work and Pensions helped prisoners understand the employment and support available for their next steps.

Leaders had not secured effective incentives for prisoners to attend education, skills and work consistently. Revised pay arrangements and monthly achievement awards recognised participation and success, but these had not overcome low attendance where the curriculum did not meet prisoners' needs or aspirations sufficiently well.

The education, skills and work curriculum was not sufficiently broad or ambitious to meet all prisoners' needs. Leaders used information about the prison population and prisoners' starting points to provide English and mathematics from entry level to level 2, alongside English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), personal development and employability courses. However, prisoners with high levels of prior attainment had particularly few opportunities to make further progress. Too few prisoners in work and vocational activities gained recognition for the knowledge and skills they developed. This was particularly in waste management, industrial cleaning and the kitchens. In industrial cleaning, much of the learning was classroom based and prisoners had little opportunity to develop more demanding practical skills, such as bio-cleaning.

Instructors did not consistently assess, record or recognise the vocational and employability skills prisoners developed through work activities. Prisoners were not routinely set personal, or employability targets linked to the knowledge, skills and behaviours they needed to develop for their next steps. Consequently, they could not readily identify the progress they were making or what they needed to improve. In wing work, cleaners and server workers could start work before completing relevant training, such as in cleaning or food hygiene. As a result, prisoners did not develop their vocational and employability skills through work in a sufficiently structured way.

Leaders provided suitable opportunities for vulnerable prisoners to access education and personal development through outreach courses. English and mathematics were incorporated into these courses, enabling prisoners to develop these skills alongside their wider learning.

Leaders did not sequence their curriculums consistently well. Prisoners could be allocated to employability before securing the necessary levels of English and mathematics. As a result, the order in which prisoners accessed learning did not consistently support them to build progressively on their existing knowledge and skills. Prisoners had too few opportunities to develop the digital skills they needed for employment and everyday life. Digital devices were not routinely available for learning and computers intended to support employability learning were frequently unavailable or did not work. Leaders had begun to roll out the Launchpad programme and Leapfrog digital learning devices, but these were at an early stage and had not yet substantially increased prisoners' opportunities to develop digital skills.

PeoplePlus delivered education and vocational training. Managers planned English, mathematics, ESOL, personal development and employability courses that reflected prisoners' starting points and levels of literacy and numeracy. Teachers were appropriately qualified and knowledgeable about their subjects. In English, mathematics and ESOL they used their subject knowledge well, corrected misunderstandings promptly and helped prisoners build their knowledge. Teachers in English set individual targets linked to prisoners' starting points and used feedback to help them improve their work. However, the quality of teaching and assessment was too variable. Targets in ESOL were too generic to identify precisely what prisoners needed to improve, while some functional skills English resources were inaccurate or not sufficiently well matched to prisoners' assessed levels. Consequently, prisoners did consistently receive sufficiently challenging work or precise enough feedback to help them improve.

Teachers used information about prisoners' neurodiverse and additional learning needs to adapt teaching and resources, including coloured overlays and enlarged text. This enabled prisoners in education with identified needs to participate and make progress alongside their peers. Prisoners with neurodiverse needs who remained in education achieved as well as their peers. However, delays in screening and assessment meant that instructors and staff in skills and work did not consistently receive the information they needed to make equivalent adjustments. Prisoners therefore did not receive the same level of support across the whole education, skills and work offer.

Leaders had introduced a prison-wide reading strategy, established a reading strategy group and identified reading champions. Teachers incorporated reading effectively into education and library staff enabled prisoners who could not access the library to obtain requested books. Reading materials were also available through the library and reading corners. However, leaders had not deployed reading champions effectively enough to extend reading support across skills and work.

Delays in completing reading screening meant that prisoners who needed help with reading were not always identified promptly. Consequently, prisoners had too few opportunities to practise and extend their reading outside formal education.

Prisoners who remained on their courses generally achieved their qualifications. Those who completed personal development qualifications at entry level and levels 1 and 2 achieved well. Prisoners in English and mathematics made progress from their starting points and could explain what they had learned and what they needed to do next. However, too few prisoners achieved their English and mathematics qualifications at levels 1 and 2.

Leaders did not analyse prisoners' progression sufficiently well. They had only limited information about prisoners' education, training and employment destinations. Consequently, they could not evaluate sufficiently well how the curriculum and careers support contributed to prisoners' progression to their next steps, whether in custody or on release. Their data did not show which prisoners progressed successfully or what had contributed to those outcomes.

Prisoners who attended education, skills and work behaved respectfully towards staff and each other. They worked safely, followed instructions and took pride in their activities. Prisoners working in kitchens and waste management demonstrated a positive work ethic and used appropriate personal protective equipment.

Attendance across education, skills and work was too low. Too many prisoners did not attend their allocated activities consistently enough, resulting in substantial lost-learning time. Consequently, prisoners did not benefit fully from the curriculum or make the progress they could during their time in custody.

Leaders had broadened the personal development opportunities available to prisoners. Prisoners who participated in creative arts, music and other enrichment programmes developed confidence, explored their interests and strengthened their well-being. Prisoners working in waste management described how their work developed their confidence, communication and teamwork. Staff promoted fundamental British values, equality, and diversity effectively in education. English and mathematics activities, for example, prompted prisoners to discuss British and family values. However, staff reinforced these concepts less effectively in work activities. However, prisoners were not consistently aware of the wider opportunities available, and timetable clashes restricted their access to them. Leaders did not monitor participation or evaluate the impact of the wider personal development offer sufficiently well. Consequently, they could not be confident that prisoners across the population benefited equally from these opportunities.

Priority concerns

Leaders did not ensure that prisoners accessed education, skills and work early enough.

Leaders did not secure sufficiently high attendance at education, skills and work.

Leaders did not provide a sufficiently broad and ambitious curriculum, particularly for prisoners with high levels of prior attainment.

Leaders did not ensure that the quality of teaching, training and assessment was consistently effective, particularly in workshops and work activities.