Ofsted report on education, skills and work activities

HMP Spring Hill

Dates of inspection: 17–21 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 ensured that there were sufficient activity spaces in education, skills and work for prisoners. Nearly all activity spaces were full-time. Since the previous inspection, leaders had considerably increased the proportion of prisoners who attended external employment in the community, with over one third of the prison's population being in full-time external employment. External work in the community was consistently purposeful and high quality.

The majority of prisoners working in the prison undertook useful work roles in farms, gardens and waste management with a few carrying out orderly roles. Leaders recognised the lack of opportunities for prisoners to gain recognition for the skills they were gaining in these roles and had plans to introduce qualifications in horticulture for those prisoners who worked in the farm and gardens. A minority of work roles lacked challenge and because of this, prisoners became uninterested.

Since the previous inspection, leaders had introduced rigorous arrangements to assess prisoners' abilities in English and mathematics. They ensured that those who needed to improve their skills in these subjects enrolled on courses soon after their arrival at the prison. Leaders had also strengthened the assessment of prisoners' wider skills, career goals and support needs. They quickly assigned prisoners to provisional work roles to better assess their aptitudes before determining longer-term work or education pathways.

Since the previous inspection leaders had ensured that prisoners received effective careers guidance on their arrival at the prison and as part of preparation for their release. Expert advisors communicated curriculum and work pathways to prisoners well. They ensured that prisoners received helpful guidance to plan and support their future progression. Prisoners received effective support to write job applications, CVs and disclosure letters to help them

to gain employment and to prepare for release. Prisoners maintained helpful career planning documents which were updated regularly to reflect on the achievement of their goals and next steps.

Leaders had planned a largely appropriate education curriculum. Around one sixth of prisoners studied education courses up to, and including, level 2 in English language, mathematics, preparation for employment and digital skills. Leaders used project funding sensibly to provide prisoners with short courses in vocational skills aligned to job vacancies such as forklift operations, warehousing and demolition. However, there were insufficient courses above level 2 and few distance learning courses for prisoners who aspired to develop their academic or vocational skills. A very small number of prisoners were well supported by a tutor to study higher education courses.

Leaders did not provide prisoners with sufficient access to Virtual Campus (VC). Very few prisoners were using VC to support job searching or to access additional learning.

Leaders had put in place generally effective quality assurance processes. They mostly assessed the strengths and weaknesses of education and work activities well. Leaders' improvement plans were largely accurate. However, they were overly positive in their assessment of a few aspects of the curriculum such as prisoners' attendance and punctuality at activities. Although leaders carried out regular visits to activities to assess the effectiveness of teaching and instruction, their findings were often superficial and lacked rigour.

Milton Keynes College was the education services provider in the prison. Teachers planned the order in which they taught topics sensibly. They largely used assessment well to prepare prisoners for their examinations and to set weekly learning targets, to help prisoners to improve. The feedback they provided to prisoners about the standards of their work was mostly helpful. However, in a few instances teachers did not take sufficient account of prisoners' individual starting points to inform the targets they set for prisoners to help them to improve. Because of this, too many prisoners with prior knowledge of a subject or repeated topics and made slow progress.

Since the previous inspection, leaders' actions to ensure that the quality of teaching and instructing were consistently effective had been partially successful. Teachers and instructors received appropriate professional development to help them to improve and to develop their effectiveness in their role. For example, instructors completed courses in horticultural machinery operations, such as forklift driving. Staff were supported to attend trade events and to shadow staff at other prisons to learn from their practices and experiences. Most teachers and instructors had received basic training in neurodiversity. They received useful information about the needs of prisoners with special educational support needs (SEND) but did not have the skills they needed to use support plans to adapt their teaching and instruction to meet the needs of these prisoners well enough.

Teachers and workshop instructors mostly taught their curriculums well. They had an in-depth knowledge of the subjects they taught. In most lessons and work activities, staff made good use of prisoner orderlies to support those who struggled with a topic or task. In English, teachers skilfully taught prisoners about persuasive language techniques, rhetorical questions, punctuation and grammar. Instructors in farms and garden activities taught prisoners how to use machinery safely and underpinned this by teaching additional maintenance skills to provide prisoners with secure mechanical knowledge.

Prisoners who attended external employment in the community quickly gained important employability skills. They learned how to use digital technologies such as stock control systems, forklifts and telehandlers. Many completed training in health and safety in the workplace through their employer. They learned how to be effective team workers and how to communicate respectfully and effectively with work colleagues, supervisors and customers. However, leaders had limited knowledge of the skills, knowledge and behaviours these prisoners were gaining.

Leaders did not have a strategic approach to helping prisoners to develop digital skills. They did not ensure that prisoners had sufficient access to information technology. The opportunities for prisoners to learn about and practise information, communication and technology were largely limited to the few prisoners who studied the digital skills course.

Prisoners' attendance at external work activities was high. They displayed positive attitudes to work and were regarded highly by employers for their reliability and willingness to take on new and additional responsibilities. Prisoners quickly gained confidence and took pride in their work. They demonstrated initiative in their work roles by working independently, and they consistently met the behavioural expectations of their employers.

Prisoners' attendance at education and work activities which took place at the prison was inconsistent and often low. Too many prisoners arrived late to their activity and this disrupted sessions for those prisoners who had arrived on time. In a few education lessons, prisoners did not arrive ready to learn. For example, they did not have pens or paper with them. Because of this, lessons often started slowly.

Prisoners felt safe in education, skills and work. They were able to study in environments which were free from bullying or harassment. Teachers and instructors promoted British values well and these were consistently exhibited by prisoners. However, teachers and instructors did not ensure that prisoners had an appropriate awareness of how to recognise or report risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. Leaders had plans to improve how these topics were taught but, at the time of the inspection, these had not been implemented.

Leaders did not provide sufficient opportunities for prisoners to attend enrichment activities to develop their interests and hobbies. There were few activities for prisoners to participate in outside of education and work. Prisoners were often bored and frustrated in their free time by the lack of organised activities across the site. Although the gymnasium was a

popular resource for a small group of prisoners, it was often closed unexpectedly and this restricted opportunities for prisoners to maintain their health and fitness.

Although leaders had an appropriate reading strategy, they had not implemented it fully. They were not assessing the impact of the actions they had taken to encourage reading rigorously enough. Leaders had ensured that prisoners had good access to books and other reading materials. However, these materials were not always up to date. For example, in the gymnasium, reading materials did not reflect current fitness practices.

Teachers used orderlies well to support the very few prisoners who were low level readers. Leaders also used the Shannon Trust appropriately to support the very few prisoners with the lowest levels of reading ability. However, teachers and instructors did not routinely encourage prisoners to read for pleasure. Prisoners' access to the library was sporadic due to closures and this curtailed opportunities to promote reading though activities such as reading groups.

Leaders had an appropriate and fair pay policy in place for prisoners. They used pay effectively to incentivise prisoners to attend education and work sessions. Leaders set clear travel and subsistence parameters for those prisoners who attend external jobs in the community.

Priority concern
Teachers and instructors did not have the skills they needed to adapt their teaching and instruction to meet the needs of prisoners with SEND.

Priority concern
There was very limited curriculum in education and vocational training beyond level two and little of the on-site work was recognised through qualifications.

Key concern
Leaders did not provide recognition of the knowledge and skills prisoners gained though employment in the community whilst on ROTL.

Key concern
Too many prisoners failed to attend their on-site activity or were late to education lessons.