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Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State
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102 Petty France
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Dear Secretary of State,

There is a clear link between education and reducing reoffending. Research and analysis that the Ministry of Justice published in 2025 highlights that “prisoners who take on any form of learning activity have a significantly lower reoffending rate on release from prison than their peers.” Put simply, the public is safer if prisoners are engaged in education.

This year marks a decade since the publication of Dame Sally Coates’ independent review of prison education. Dame Sally made 31 recommendations, urging ministers to “put education at the heart of the prison regime” and recognise its importance in reducing reoffending. She recommended a focus on recruiting high-quality teachers, revising funding for prison education to enable ambitious curriculums and building digital systems to support flexible learning.

Following publication of the Coates report, the Ministry of Justice accepted all of Dame Sally’s recommendations in principle. However, full implementation plans were not published and in 2022 the House of Commons Education Committee made clear that further improvements were required. The Committee reported that “it is imperative that there is a renewed focus on embedding a culture of education into prison establishments. This will not happen unless it is supported by all prison departments, and by all levels of staff.”

As Chief Inspectors, we agree with this, noting that focus and accountability for high-quality education extends beyond individual establishments to central teams in HM Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Justice. We have repeatedly called for a much-needed focus on better education and training in prison.

It is therefore deeply disappointing that inspections of purposeful activity – which includes examination by Ofsted of education, training and work – consistently find very poor standards, with few prisons lately having met the minimum for either Ofsted's 'good' judgement for overall effectiveness or HMI Prison's 'reasonably good' test. Rather than the transformation Dame Sally called for, with good-quality education and training at its heart, too many prisons are characterised by a lack of education, skills and work activity and limited regimes.

The decline in HMI Prisons purposeful activity scores over the last 10 years has been dramatic. In 2016–17, 55% of the prisons inspected scored either 'reasonably good' or 'good' for purposeful activity. Since the pandemic, the situation has got even worse. In 2025–26, just 23% of the adult prisons inspected scored 'reasonably good' or 'good'.

The same trend of decline is evident in Ofsted's judgements. On 31 August 2017, 44% of prisons were graded good or outstanding for overall effectiveness; at that point in time, this percentage was increasing. By the time of Ofsted's most recent annual report (2024–25), the corresponding figure had slipped to just 18%. Ministry of Justice reporting on proven reoffending rates shows that the most recent overall reoffending rates are now higher than those seen prior to the pandemic. We feel that it is reasonable to assume that poorer quality provision has contributed to this picture.

In October 2025 there were significant real-terms cuts to prison education, risking making an appalling situation even worse. The Ministry of Justice's own data has since shown the scale of the impact, with some prisons losing more than 50% of their education hours.[1] In some of the country's highest risk jails – such as HMP Swaleside, HMP Manchester, HMP Long Lartin and HMP Woodhill, all in the long-term high secure estate (LTHSE) – inspectors reported a more limited range of learning and work opportunities available as a result of cuts. When we inspected HMP Manchester in January this year – a training prison scored as 'inadequate' in all areas by Ofsted during its previous inspection –we noted that the cuts had led to the loss of many education staff and a severe curtailment of educational activity. Inspectors found that education, skills and work activities were too often closed, sometimes for weeks on end, while prisoners had access to a narrow curriculum with limited opportunities to gain accredited qualifications. Yet again Ofsted scored the jail as 'inadequate' across all key judgements. The cuts are likely to mean that men leave the LTHSE no better off than when they first arrived, and in some cases, even more likely to commit crime.

Elsewhere in the estate, at HMP Norwich much of the vocational training on the category C site had ended following substantial cuts, and at HMP Bure efforts to improve provision had been undermined by severe cuts, resulting in a limited curriculum and fewer opportunities for prisoners. Prison governors across the country have reported to us the loss of vocational

[1] Prison education: core education planned delivery volumes April 2025 to March 2027 - GOV.UK

courses that equip prisoners with practical skills and boost employability, including construction, catering, cycle mechanics, engineering technology and electrical installation. As well as this, Ofsted has also found numbers of available spaces in essential core subjects such as mathematics, English, and English for speakers of other languages being reduced significantly, as well as cuts in support for those who need to improve their reading. Recent progress reviews at some reception jails point to further challenges. At HMP Liverpool we noted redundancies of teachers which compounded the shortcomings of an already poorly performing service, and at HMP Leicester cuts to the education contract meant that leaders had closed courses such as art and catering which can be vital as a means of engaging the most reluctant learners to become involved in education, skills and work.

At HMP New Hall, although Ofsted found the teaching delivered by the education provider to be effective, financial constraints had affected the number of days that education was provided, the range of courses offered and the flexibility of the provider to cover for staff absence. The new contract had also led to a loss of some key staff.

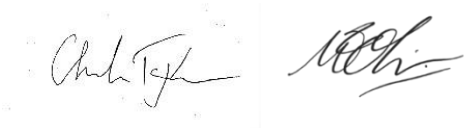
Since October 2025, the vast majority of purposeful activity scores have continued to be 'poor' or 'not sufficiently good', with Ofsted continuing to typically grade provision as either 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. Notable exceptions include HMP Portland and HMP Wayland, where inspectors praised the tenacity and innovation of teams who had enabled good provision to be sustained despite cuts. This included praise for the work of well-qualified teachers and trainers who planned and taught their curriculums well. Similarly, leaders at HMP & YOI Low Newton had managed to maintain a good range of courses while facing financial pressures, and as a result their teachers were able to design and teach ambitious, contemporary curriculums. We must, however, be clear that these dedicated leaders and teachers have achieved positive results *despite* the system in which they work, rather than because of it. If purposeful activity is to improve and prisons to offer ambitious, inclusive and accessible curriculums, governors need support, encouragement and, crucially, adequate resource to meet the needs of the populations their prisons hold.

Despite the overall picture of decline in prison education over the last decade, we should recognise some of the positive developments we have seen in strategic leadership. The introduction of neurodiversity support managers has helped to strengthen staff understanding and response to the needs of this group, while the establishment of heads of education, skills and work has provided clearer leadership and accountability for purposeful activity within prisons. These roles have the potential to make a meaningful difference to prisoners' experiences and outcomes, and in some establishments inspectors have seen how skilled leaders with a broad experience of education have helped to drive improvement. However, while these initiatives represent welcome steps in the right direction, they have not been matched by the sustained investment, system-wide focus and consistent implementation needed to secure the widespread improvement envisaged by the Coates review.

Ten years on from the Coates review, and despite the change it called for, prison education is now in a poorer state. There can be no more excuses: it is time to take action. The prison service must reorientate itself to giving prisoners the education, skills, knowledge and work habits to be successful on release, leading to less pressure on prison places and fewer

victims of crime. We hope that the prison service will equip its governors and staff with the resources and support they need to enable all prisoners to access the basic education and high-quality vocational training necessary to reduce their risk of reoffending and improve their life prospects. We hope that in the coming years our inspections will report on this much-needed transformation.

Yours sincerely,



Charlie Taylor and Martyn Oliver