

# Learning and skills for the longer-serving offender

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The findings of this report derive from survey visits to 19 prisons and an analysis of the reports of 10 inspections. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the provision of learning and skills for offenders on long custodial sentences.

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## Executive summary

The findings of this report derive from survey visits to 19 adult prisons in England between January and June 2008, and an analysis of ten inspection reports from the inspection of learning and skills in prisons by Ofsted. The prisons included local, training, high security and women's prisons. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate learning and skills provision for offenders on long sentences. In this survey, a long sentence is defined as a sentence of four years or more.<sup>1</sup>

None of the prisons visited had an explicit learning and skills strategy for offenders on long-term sentences of four years or more. Learning and skills strategies were centred on an offender's length of stay at an individual prison, and did not consider how long the offender would be in custody.

In the prisons visited the curriculum was designed around the average length of stay in the prison and did not adequately provide for those on longer sentences or those who stay longer than the average. The learning and skills provision in each prison had been developed independently. This hindered opportunities to continue a coherent learning programme throughout offenders' sentences when they moved to a new prison.

Information, advice and guidance were usually limited to an offender's stay at a particular prison. In half of the prisons visited there were inadequate links with other functions within the prison, such as resettlement and sentence planning. It was unclear how the information, advice and guidance services funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contributed to or complemented sentence planning, resettlement and offender management.

Where offenders had individual learning plans, these were for each offender's stay at that prison and did not adequately consider what had taken place before arriving at the prison or the offender's full time in custody. Offenders rarely had a copy of their individual learning plan and were not given responsibility to keep it and to take it with them to learning programmes and interviews with various support services.

Arrangements to transfer offenders' records between prisons and between prisons and probation were ineffective. Individual learning plans were often not transferred with offenders.

Between a third and two thirds of offenders in the prisons visited had low literacy and/or numeracy skills. In the prisons visited there was little on offer for those who already had a level 2 qualification. Distance learning programmes were available for those who were able and had the time to devote to this activity. Learning and skills distance learning programmes above level 2 were not included in many prison

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<sup>1</sup> Ofsted has also published a companion to this survey entitled *Learning and skills for offenders serving short custodial sentences*, which evaluates provision for those serving less than 12 months.

strategies. The better prisons provided effective support for those on distance learning programmes, helping them with research and providing classrooms with computers.

Around half of the prisons had good links with a limited number of employers, but just two had well-established links with a range of employers.

## Key findings

In the prisons surveyed, the following contributed to meeting the needs of offenders on long custodial sentences:

- the priority given to the development of offenders' literacy, numeracy and language skills
- the availability of open and distance learning programmes
- the use of release on temporary licence, particularly in women's prisons, to enable some offenders to attend college towards the end of their sentence.

The survey identified the following aspects which needed further improvement:

- there was a lack of explicit strategies to meet the learning and skills needs of offenders on long sentences
- in the prisons visited the curriculum was designed around the average length of stay in the prison and did not adequately provide for those on longer sentences
- the use and analysis of performance data and other relevant information were not differentiated by sentence length
- there was a lack of coordination and clarity about how the information, advice and guidance provided through the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service contributes to and is coordinated with other services within the prison, such as sentence planning, offender management and resettlement
- individual learning plans were generally for an offender's stay at a particular prison and did not adequately consider the whole sentence
- the transfer of offenders' records between prisons and between prisons and probation was slow and too often records did not arrive
- there was insufficient building on offenders' previous or existing skills
- links with employers were underdeveloped and where they existed were often with a narrow range of employers
- offenders who already had a level 2 qualification had very little opportunity to progress further.

## Recommendations

- The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the LSC should develop a national strategy to include employers to support the planned 'core curriculum' for learning and skills provision.
- Learning and skills providers with the National Offender Management Service and the prisons should clearly identify how the sequencing of offenders' learning should be achieved and how individual establishments will contribute to this.
- Prisons should have learning and skills strategies that include the role they play in supporting offenders on long sentences.
- DIUS, the LSC and individual prisons should ensure that they provide the resources and support necessary to enable a wide range of offenders to progress to programmes beyond level 2, including open and distance learning programmes.
- Providers and the LSC should evaluate the impact of literacy, numeracy and language programmes on offenders on longer sentences and how this might be improved.
- Providers and prisons should give consideration to allowing offenders to keep, maintain and take responsibility for their own learning plan.
- The LSC and prisons should establish a system to ensure that offenders' learning records are available wherever they are needed in order to plan, manage and record learning.
- The LSC should clarify the role of the offender learning information, advice and guidance service in the context of other services such as sentence planning, offender management and resettlement.
- The LSC and prisons should implement data systems to allow the recording of offenders' learning throughout their sentence so that these data can be used by prisons, providers and other agencies to analyse performance across the whole system, not just at individual establishments.

## Background to the survey

1. This survey evaluates learning and skills provision for offenders serving custodial sentences of four or more years. Ofsted has also published a companion survey entitled *Learning and skills for offenders serving short custodial sentences*, which evaluates provision for those serving sentences of less than 12 months. These two periods of duration of custodial sentence were selected for further investigation as prison inspections had identified particular challenges in providing an appropriate programme of learning and skills for offenders in each category.

2. *The offender's learning journey*, published by the Social Inclusion and Offenders Unit in 2004, describes the components of high-quality learning and skills services at all stages of a learner's journey during his or her sentence. It should include effective advice and guidance, individual learning plans, and learning and development activities which are of the same standard as those available to learners in other settings. It places an emphasis on continuity of learning, including during transition between establishments and from custody to community settings. It also emphasises continuity and coherence in sharing information and transferring records to enable the whole system to provide effective support for offenders at all stages of their sentence.
3. Following live-running trials in three LSC regions, the new Offenders' Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) was rolled out across all nine English regions on 31 July 2006. This saw the introduction of new contracts between the LSC and lead providers for the provision of learning and skills in prisons and probation areas. Most lead providers are colleges, with a few private training providers. The LSC remit covers the design and delivery of learning and skills provision provided by its contracted providers for offenders in England who are held in public sector prisons or who are under supervision in the community. The LSC has clear accountability for the planning and funding of much offender learning and for the delivery of learning outcomes. It has overall responsibility for managing the learning and skills provider contracts. This responsibility is expected to transfer to the Skills Funding Agency in 2010.
4. The prime function of the prison service is the security and protection of the public and the reduction of re-offending. Ensuring that learning and skills provision works effectively in prisons is complex. It depends on good partnership working between different organisations, each with very different core responsibilities, but all working to a shared aspiration to reduce re-offending.
5. In September 2007, the LSC published *Developing the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service: The Prospectus*. This described its proposals to develop and reform offender learning. In its response to the consultation on the prospectus the LSC published the document *Offender learning and skills: taking the next step* (2008), which states:

'The Prospectus derives its vision of the contribution which learning and skills can play in reducing re-offending to the thinking laid out in *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment: next steps* (DfES 2006). The *Next steps* document sets out how to realise the vision in the Green Paper *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment* (2005). The issues on which the consultation is based are extremely complex. They involve the planning, funding and delivery of a very broad curriculum offer to arguably one of the 'hardest to reach' groups of potential learners. In addition this task is to be achieved within the parameters of the criminal

justice system and the outcome of learning and skills is not only the learning itself but a contribution to reducing re-offending.'

6. According to the LSC, upwards of 36% of the current public sector prison population is engaged in LSC-funded learning provision at any one time. There remains a rich source of learning and skills provision that is not funded by the LSC. This comprises a range of different prison-funded programmes including offending behaviour programmes, work skills developed in many prison workshops, most catering programmes and physical education programmes. Many voluntary organisations also fund their own programmes which are supported through private funding. Some providers also contract individually with prisons.
7. Offenders serving long sentences, defined as four years or more, comprise a large proportion of the prison population. Including those on indeterminate sentences, just over half of the sentenced population are serving sentences of four years or more. In February 2008, according to *Population in custody February 2008*, a Ministry of Justice publication, the adult prison population in England and Wales was 69,985.
8. According to *Re-offending of adults: results from the 2003 cohort*, published by the Home Office in November 2006, the re-offending rate for offenders who served sentences of four years or more was 35%, half that of those who served sentences of less than a year.

## The provision of learning and skills for offenders on long sentences

### Strategic planning of learning and skills for those on long sentences

9. None of the prisons visited had an explicit learning and skills strategy for offenders on long-term sentences. Only four had a strategy that provided any differentiation according to sentence length. One prison had drafted a strategy but this was in the very early stages of development. Learning and skills strategies were centred on the offender's length of stay at the prison, and did not extend to considering how long the offender would be in custody. Therefore offenders on short and long sentences were offered the same opportunities and support. There was no consideration of the longer term development of an offender beyond the establishment they were currently in.
10. Even in the four prisons which were dedicated to housing offenders on long sentences, there was no strategy that went beyond an offender's stay at that establishment. Offenders stayed in these prisons on average for two years, with some staying in the same establishment for four years or more. These prisons

considered their role as one of accommodating offenders and providing interim regimes for offenders moving to other prisons before being released.

## The use of management information, monitoring and planning learning

11. None of the prisons visited was able to provide data on learners' performance that were differentiated by sentence length. They were able to provide data about the proportion of the population that was on a long sentence. However, there was little quantified information about the participation of offenders in learning and skills according to their sentence length, what they were engaged in or how successful they were.
12. Data on the performance of offenders in learning and skills activities and on the performance of programmes were predominantly kept by the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service provider. The prison service maintains an offender's sentence plan and the prison service training record – which is often a simple list of programmes attended. Too often these different systems and plans were not linked. The prison service does not have access to comprehensive information about the learning and skills activities of offenders. Equally, the providers rely on each other to send information when an offender transfers and remains a learner, and this does not routinely happen, or information is delayed.
13. Where offenders had individual learning plans, these were for an offender's stay at that prison and did not adequately consider what had taken place before arriving at the prison or the offender's full time in custody. In six of the prisons, offenders did not have an overall learning plan for their stay at that prison. In the worst cases, offenders had different learning plans for each course they attended rather than an overall learning plan that identified their needs, how these would be addressed and the progress made. There were good examples of providers and the prison ensuring that the sentence plans were updated with the contents of offenders' learning plans, but this was not common practice across the prisons visited.
14. The offenders surveyed were not encouraged to take ownership of their individual learning plan and most plans were kept by tutors in the classroom or in education departments. Offenders rarely had a copy of their individual learning plan and were not given responsibility to keep it and to take it with them to learning programmes and interviews with various support services. When offenders transferred between prisons they had to rely on the prison and the provider to transfer their records. Where this did not happen, they had to rely on memory to explain to the new establishment what they had done or were planning to do. One prison was piloting a progress record for offenders. This would enable offenders to keep and maintain their own record of achievement.

15. The transfer of offenders' records between prisons and between prisons and probation remains an important area for improvement. All of the prisons visited claimed to pass on offenders' basic skills assessment, training record, certificates and learning plan; however, with only three exceptions, these prisons also claimed not to receive records from other prisons, or that they arrive late. The transfer of information to probation from prisons is equally poor. Prison and probation systems are incompatible, and concerns about data protection and security are seen as considerable barriers.

### **Offenders' literacy, numeracy and language skills**

16. Up to two thirds of offenders in the prisons visited had low literacy and/or numeracy skills. Data were not available to differentiate this according to sentence length, removing the opportunity to identify the extent to which these offenders are benefiting from the prevalence of literacy and numeracy programmes throughout the prison service. Prison and provider staff reported a mixed picture of the extent to which offenders' literacy and numeracy needs had been addressed. All but two of the prisons reported a surprisingly high number of offenders who still had low levels of literacy and numeracy skills after many years in prison. In one such prison, the offenders showed little motivation to address these needs. Even those prisons that housed offenders on long sentences who were near the end of their sentence reported a high incidence of low literacy and numeracy skills among offenders. In seven of the prisons surveyed, the offenders' individual learning needs in literacy and numeracy were supported by teaching these skills alongside vocational training in the workshops. Offenders applied their new learning to real work tasks.
17. Offenders' individual learning needs in literacy and numeracy skills have a high priority in most prison learning and skills strategies. They recognise that basic skills difficulties are likely to impede employment prospects. However, most prisons do not always take full account of the need to improve offenders' literacy and numeracy skills to help them develop and contribute fully to a range of vocational and social activities in the prison, prison work or their own rehabilitation and development. In particular, learning and skills strategies do not recognise the need and benefit of improving these skills to a level where other programmes, such as offending behaviour programmes, become more accessible and beneficial. They do not give sufficient emphasis to the benefits of developing these skills early on in an offender's sentence.

### **Developing offenders' skills and knowledge while in custody and preparing for release into the community**

18. An information, advice and guidance service is provided as part of the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service provision in prisons. Inspectors found that this was usually limited to an offender's stay at a particular prison and in half of the prisons visited there were inadequate links with other prison services. It was unclear how the information, advice and guidance services

provided by the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service contributed to or complemented the prison service resettlement team and the ongoing offender management process.

19. In one prison, the information, advice and guidance was only concerned with carrying out basic skill assessments and developing a learning plan for the duration of the offender's stay at the prison. This simply identified programmes to attend and there was little ongoing information, advice and guidance after this. In the same prison the prison service resettlement team carried out very effective work with offenders in the last 13 weeks of their sentence to help identify work opportunities and any barriers to employment. There was no effective interaction between these services or between the information, advice and guidance worker and the offender manager.
20. There were some better examples. In one prison information, advice and guidance was highly focused on how offenders could meet the demands of their sentence plan in order to move to an open prison. In another, guidance workers reviewed the length of the sentence and produced an action plan detailing short- and long-term targets in collaboration with the offender supervisor.
21. The survey found very little evidence of learning and skills programmes building on offenders' previous or existing skills. The learning and skills offered in each prison had been developed independently across a range of differently funded providers, and opportunities to continue a coherent learning programme throughout an offender's sentence were hindered by this. Although guidance workers attempted to discuss what offenders had previously done, there was little evidence of a coherent programme of study building on what had already been achieved, and planning for longer than the expected stay at that prison. Advice and planning was predominantly focused on what was available in that prison rather than the long-term needs of the offender.
22. There were examples of good practice at particular points in the sentence. For example, in one prison guidance workers had good links with local colleges and release on temporary licence was used to help offenders begin a college course prior to release. However, this was at the end of the sentence when opportunities were limited by the time remaining. Inspectors found few examples of good planning of guidance and support throughout the offenders' stay that helped offenders identify what they could achieve during their sentence.

## **Providing a suitable learning programme for those serving long-term sentences**

23. In the prisons visited, the programme of learning and skills on offer was not appropriate for those on long sentences and the range of programmes was narrow. The curriculum was designed around the average length of stay in the prison and did not adequately provide for those on longer sentences or those

who stay longer than the average. Those on long-term sentences quickly exhausted the programmes available. In one prison the curriculum repeated every six weeks and many offenders on long sentences had attended what was available and were left with few opportunities to develop further. This was a particular issue in open prisons. Offenders in these establishments have been in the system for some time and are near the end of their sentence. The offer of literacy and numeracy and level 2 qualifications simply repeated the opportunities available at other prisons rather than providing for progression.

24. In the prisons visited there was little on offer for those who already had a level 2 qualification. Offenders who had, or gained in prison, a level 2 qualification had very little opportunity to progress further. These prisons offered distance learning opportunities but this form of learning is not appropriate for all. Others provided offenders with a level 2 qualification with the opportunity to work as mentors and teaching assistants, and this sometimes provided the opportunity to gain a higher-level qualification. However, there were very few vocational opportunities beyond level 2.
25. All of the prisons visited offered distance learning programmes for those who are able and have the time. Distance learning programmes above level 2 are not generally publicly funded and offenders need to find alternative funding, either privately or through a charity. The most common source is the Prisoners' Education Trust, which makes about 2,000 awards each year, although offenders are required to contribute 10% of the funding. In each of the prisons visited between 20 and 50 offenders were studying on a distance learning programme. However, this is not an appropriate means of study for everyone and requires self-discipline, commitment and time-management skills. The better prisons provided effective support for those on distance learning programmes, providing a dedicated study room, tutor support and computing resources. In the worst cases there was limited access to the necessary resources, including computers and research facilities. One prison offered no support at all to offenders on distance learning programmes.

## **Developing employment skills and employability**

26. In three of the prisons visited there was a wide range of vocational training opportunities for offenders, delivered by a range of providers. These included the more commonly found programmes in information and communication technology, assembly processes, industrial cleaning, catering, horticulture, business studies, sports awards, plumbing and railway track maintenance. In the better prisons, offenders who already had level 2 qualifications could work as peer mentors or train as guidance workers. Some had the opportunity to achieve a level 3 National Vocational Qualification in advice and guidance. However, this was not common practice.
27. Women's prisons generally offered a good range of vocational programmes that included non-traditional areas such as engineering and basic car mechanics

along with the more traditional hairdressing, childcare, family days and drug and alcohol awareness. Release on temporary licence was used more with women than men in the prisons visited. However, the same difficulties existed for those who were in a prison for a long period of time. In one prison some women spent a considerable number of years serving out their sentence at the prison, but apart from distance learning programmes, little consideration was given to gaining sustainable skills for resettlement and long-term employment.

28. Inspectors found that prisons had good links to employers in the local area but this had not yet had a significant impact in the prisons visited. In five of the prisons, particularly holding prisons which released very few offenders into the community, employer links were seen as unnecessary. Links with employers were often lacking in prisons which released offenders after a long sentence. Around half of the prisons had good links with a limited number of employers. These provided good opportunities for those offenders who wanted and were able to work in those particular industries, but were unhelpful to others. In one prison there were very strong links with an international hotel chain. Chefs from the chain ran catering and employability programmes at the prison and successful offenders were offered interviews on release. In its own right this was a successful project, providing vocational skills and leading to employment. However, this was only relevant for a minority of the prison population.
29. Just two of the prisons visited had well-established links with a range of employers. In these prisons there were strong links with employers and employment organisations and vocational training was linked to the needs of the employers. These included opportunities for offenders to gain qualifications in railway track maintenance, double glazing and website design, linked to realistic employment opportunities on release.

### **A summary of key features to inform the future development of effective programmes for offenders serving long sentences**

- A good understanding by the prison of the purpose of education and training
- a good understanding by offenders of the provision and preparation for progress towards release/rehabilitation
- a learning and skills strategy that takes account of an offender's length of sentence and the value of training/qualifications
- learning programmes that fit the actual sentence to be served
- appropriate commencement of learning and skills programmes that take account of individual personal and health needs
- good promotion of the education and training strategy and learning programmes across the prison
- effective planning of interpersonal skills, coping strategies and personal development alongside education and training programmes
- priority given to literacy and numeracy programmes to help improve offenders' chances to gain employment

- good working arrangements with all other areas of the prison
- well-qualified tutors with a good understanding of the criminal justice system and the context in which learning takes place
- well-planned resettlement programmes that take account of offenders' release dates
- consideration of the needs of offenders at retirement age
- the effective transfer of information between prisons to help the continuity of offenders' education and training.

## Notes

Between January and June 2008, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 19 prisons in England to evaluate the range of provision offered to those offenders serving custodial sentences of four years or more. The sample comprised local, training, high-security and women's prisons across the country. Some of these prisons had a small proportion of offenders serving longer sentences, others had a high proportion. Inspectors interviewed prison and provider staff responsible for learning and skills and scrutinised relevant documentation. They also held interviews with key personnel at the Prison Service and the LSC. In addition, the findings from the inspection of learning and skills in prisons and probation areas during this period were analysed and relevant evidence was considered.

## Further information

The companion to this survey, *Learning and skills for offenders serving short custodial sentences*, 2009, is on our website:  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070233](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070233).

Inspection reports on the learning and skills provided in English prisons can be found in the inspection reports section of our website under adult learning:  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare\\_providers/list](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare_providers/list).

Information about the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service can be found at:  
<http://olass.lsc.gov.uk/>.

*The offender's learning journey*, the Green Paper *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment*, 2005, and other strategic documents are available from:  
[www.dcsf.gov.uk/offenderlearning/index.cfm](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/offenderlearning/index.cfm).

The LSC's proposals to develop and reform offender learning, *Developing the offenders' learning and skill service: the prospectus*, 2007 are available from  
<http://olass.lsc.gov.uk/prospectus/>.

In response to the consultation on the LSC's proposal to develop and reform offender learning, *Developing the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service: the prospectus 2007*, the LSC published *Offenders' Learning and Skills: Taking the next step*, available at:  
<http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/nat-olasstakingfirststep-sept08.pdf>.

Inspection reports on all prisons in England are available from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons at: <http://inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprisons/>.

Inspection reports on probation services in England are available from her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation at: <http://inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprobation/>.

Information about the work of the Prisoners' Education Trust and the provision of distance learning programmes in prisons is available at:  
[www.offenderseducation.org.uk/](http://www.offenderseducation.org.uk/).

The Ministry of Justice provides monthly statistical releases presenting tables on the population in custody. It also contains more detailed information on the make-up of the prison population by custody type, offence group, sentence length, age group and establishment: [www.justice.gov.uk/publications/populationincustody.htm](http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/populationincustody.htm).

## Annex. Prisons participating in the survey

HMP Brixton\*  
HMP Coldingley  
HMP Dartmoor  
HMP Drake Hall  
HMP Edmunds Hill  
HMP Frankland\*  
HMP Garth  
HMP Highpoint  
HMP Hollesley Bay  
HMP Holloway\*  
HMP Kirkham  
HMP Kingston  
HMP Parkhurst  
HMP Peterborough\*  
HMP Send  
HMP Shepton Mallet  
HMP Whitemoor\*  
HMP Wolds  
HMP Wymott

\* Visit incorporated into planned inspection activity.