

# Learning in the justice sector

## Provider Data

**6**

Adult prisons

**1**

Youth offender institutes

**17**

Youth justice services

**1**

Secure children's homes

## Independent Reviews of Progress

Independent Reviews of Progress (IRPs) are conducted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons) to assess how well prisons are addressing concerns identified during previous inspections, particularly those highlighted in Urgent Notifications or particularly troubling inspections. These reviews are not full inspections but rather focus on evaluating progress in specific areas of concern, assessing leadership and management responses, and identifying emerging difficulties. IRPs typically take place 8-12 months after the initial inspection and involve a smaller team of inspectors. Where concerns have been highlighted by Estyn, our inspectors will join IRPs.

No. of IRP(s): 1

## Inspection activity

## Spotlights

No. of spotlights: 4

No. of core inspections:

3 core inspections, covering 4 adult men's prisons

## Summary

In partnership with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, Estyn carried out core inspections of four adult men's prisons and one independent progress review of a young offenders' institute (YOI).

Leaders had worked effectively with staff and partners towards securing a varied curriculum and strong learner outcomes. Several vocational environments in adult prisons were of high quality. Learners valued personal and social development activities, and most prisons worked hard to provide

training, qualifications, advice, and employment opportunities before release. However, provision for independent living skills was inconsistent.

Learners generally had strong relationships with staff and felt safe during activities. Many, especially in vocational training, made sound progress and gained suitable accreditations. Nonetheless, concerns remained about the development of learners' reading and digital skills.

Half of adult men's prisons lacked sufficient full-time education, training, or work for all prisoners, affecting well-being and readiness for release. Attendance was weak in half of the prisons, and some learners disengaged due to weaknesses in curriculum, teaching, or course allocation. While many teachers used helpful approaches, a minority did not plan well enough for learners' needs, leading to insufficient progress for a minority of learners.

Leaders had improved self-evaluation and acted on findings to enhance the curriculum, although they did not always address weaknesses in teaching quality.

The YOI had made reasonable progress since the core inspection. Staffing had stabilised, collaboration with the education provider had improved, and valuable work was underway to enhance the offer for learners — boosting team ethos and learner engagement. However, issues remained with teaching quality and the curriculum.

## Teaching and learning

Most teachers built trusting and positive working relationships with learners. Nearly all learners were respectful of their peers and teachers and worked well in groups or independently during sessions. Many had strong attitudes to learning, and the majority achieved suitable accreditations. Many learners who were engaged in vocational learning generally made strong progress in developing their skills. Read about how learners in [HMP Berwyn in Wrexham](#) make strong progress in vocational skills.

In a minority of adult men's prisons, learners developed relevant literacy and numeracy skills as part of their vocational learning contexts. However, in the many adult prisons, literacy and numeracy skills were not sufficiently embedded into vocational context. Most learners across the estate did not develop their digital skills due to a lack of structured learning opportunities.

Attendance in education, training and work was weak in half of the adult prisons inspected. A minority of prisoners did not engage well enough in their learning and made insufficient progress overall. This was generally due to weaknesses in teaching or because they had been allocated to courses that they had previously completed in other establishments or had expressed no interest in.

A majority of teachers employed a range of helpful approaches to engage and motivate learners, providing clear explanations, planning suitable learning activities, and offering regular coaching and verbal feedback to support learners effectively in lessons. In a few cases, where teaching was particularly successful, teachers personalised the provision to learners' needs, considered learners' progress, engagement and desired learning outcomes well when planning learning activities, and used questioning approaches effectively to deepen learning and understanding.

A minority of teaching was not effective in securing sufficient progress or engagement. In these cases, teachers either did not:

- consider learners' starting points or needs well enough

- develop learners' skills progressively, sometimes focusing too narrowly on repetitive and unchallenging tasks
- support learners to improve their knowledge and understanding through their questioning; or
- provide learners with sufficiently clear guidance on how to improve the quality of their work

## Well-being, care, support and guidance

Nearly all learners told us that they feel safe when engaged in learning activities.

Staff used baseline assessments appropriately to inform individual learning and work plans (ILWPs). In half of the adult men's prisons inspected, staff took care to ensure that most learners accessed purposeful activities well matched to their needs and aspirations. At the YOI, learners benefited from weekly reviews of their ILWPs. However, too often the quality of ILWPs was inconsistent or did not link meaningfully to learners' sentence plans. In addition, in half of adult prisons, advice and guidance did not consistently prepare prisoners to make well-informed decisions, which contributed to some learners being enrolled on courses that did not meet their needs.

All prisons and the YOI had a neurodiversity support manager or an additional learning needs co-ordinator. However, in around half of the prisons inspected, the staff's understanding of how to support learners with complex needs was variable. Where this work had evolved well, the support provided was particularly strong. Read about how learners at [HMP Usk](#) and [HMP Prescoed in Monmouthshire](#) benefit from targeted learning support.

A few learners took on worthwhile leadership roles, for example as peer mentors or supporting with vocational activities. Generally, all prisons and the YOI offered personal development activities, such as those focused on financial awareness, employability, citizenship, and mental health, which learners valued. Where offered, learners also benefited from worthwhile well-being activities, such as art, music, and drama. However, there was insufficient provision for independent living skills in many men's prisons.

All men's prisons provided valuable resettlement advice and guidance. This included help with opening bank accounts, interviews and securing funding to provide tools for employment. The access prisoner had to qualifications and training improved their prospects of employment upon release. In around half of men's prisons, a systematic approach to identifying resettlement needs ensured that wrap-around support was timely and tailored closely to learners' needs. However, half of men's prisons did not make sufficient use of release on temporary licence (ROTL). In some cases, leaders' efforts to secure suitable ROTL placements were hindered by the early release of prisoners.

## Leading and improving

Across all prisons and the YOI visited during the year, leaders had worked diligently towards their vision for securing strong outcomes for learners. They used targeted visits to other prisons effectively to observe and share practice. A minority of providers inspected and the YOI offered early-careers teachers valuable professional learning to strengthen their teaching and vocational learning.

All adult prisons offered a varied curriculum that met the vocational, academic, or personal development needs of many learners appropriately. Generally, vocational learning environments provided valuable and authentic learning contexts, some of which were industry-standard. The

flexible curriculum structure at HMP Usk and HMP Prescoed was a strength, enabling learners to combine education with work placements and other responsibilities.

Half of men's prisons did not offer all learners sufficient full-time education, training or work provision to adequately prepare them for the realities of work, training, or education upon release. In addition, weaknesses in allocations or disruptions to regimes negatively impacted learners' well-being, engagement and progress. In a minority of men's prisons, the curriculum offered for vulnerable prisoners was too narrow. Overall, there was limited curriculum provision for learners to develop their digital skills.

Half of men's prisons offered valuable opportunities for staff and prisoners to learn and improve their Welsh language skills. However, in a minority of cases, prisons did not adequately support the needs of Welsh speakers or promote the use of Welsh sufficiently.

All men's prisons and the YOI had implemented a strategy for developing learners' reading skills. These included valuable initiatives that encouraged prisoners to read for enjoyment, such as a resident reader who facilitated group reading and drama groups. At the YOI, learners with weak literacy skills were assessed for their reading ability and participated in appropriate interventions. At this provider, all education staff had received some basic training on how to provide opportunities for reading as part of cross-curricular learning. In one prison, staff had embedded literacy skills innovatively into vocational pathways. Overall, however, there remained shortcomings in the provision for reading across the estate, or initiatives were too new at the time of inspection to evaluate their impact. There were insufficient formal interventions to support non and emergent readers to develop their reading skills, particularly in the adult estate.

Leaders across all inspected providers had enhanced their range of self-evaluation approaches. They drew on the outcomes of these activities, such as information on the needs of prisoners and the labour market, to strengthen the range of courses and the qualifications offered. At the YOI, leaders had strengthened their processes for self-evaluation, including their approaches to evaluating teaching. Nearly all leaders had improved their monitoring of the progress of specific groups at risk of adverse outcomes, such as those from ethnic minority backgrounds or with additional learning needs. In a minority of cases, leaders used this information appropriately to identify improvements in provision.

Despite the strengthening of arrangements, there was continued variability in the quality and impact of self-evaluation and improvement planning across providers. Shortcomings included:

- not robustly evaluating teaching or interventions, often rewarding the existence of features rather than their impact
- missing important aspects of provision
- not evaluating in a timely way to enable a swift response to changing circumstances, for example the early release of prisoners
- not evaluating the impact of professional learning for staff, or linking it well enough to performance management approaches
- focusing too much on operational matters, limiting leaders' strategic impact

## Overview of recommendations from inspections

During the academic year 2024-2025, in partnership with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, Estyn carried out three core inspections of purposeful activity in four adult men's prisons and one independent review of the progress of a young offenders' institute. Several key themes emerged from the recommendations provided by inspection teams. These related to weaknesses in:

- teaching
- provision for developing reading skills
- learners' attendance
- arrangements for allocating prisoners to education, training or work activities
- the lack of a full-time purposeful activity offer
- the quality and impact of self-evaluation and improvement planning