

Basic Skills

for offenders in the community



Ministerial foreword

We welcome this report from the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) on efforts to improve the literacy and numeracy of offenders in the community.*

The Government believes that offenders should have access to good-quality education and training in the community. This can help them to gain skills and qualifications which can open up alternatives to crime. It can also help them obtain and keep appropriate employment, and play a positive role within the community.

The report comes at a promising moment, with the introduction of the new arrangements to support the learning and skills of offenders in the community. Under these new arrangements the Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), in partnership with the National Probation Service (NPS) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), will be responsible for the learning and skills of offenders under supervision of the NPS.

Providing more and better education to help offenders is a key part of the Government's effort to rehabilitate offenders and reduce reoffending. In recent years we have significantly improved the educational achievements of offenders in prison. We now need to take further action to tackle the learning needs of offenders under supervision in the community. We readily acknowledge that the ALI report highlights areas where improvements need to be made. We are determined to address these issues and indeed a lot has already been achieved or is in hand. We are asking the new national partnership between the OLSU, NPS and the LSC to build upon the strong partnership links which already exist between many NPS areas and local LSCs.

The importance of this area should not be underestimated. In any one year, the NPS supervises approximately 200,000 offenders aged 18 and over. They include offenders serving community sentences and those released from prison on licence, some of whom will have been able to gain qualifications in literacy, language and numeracy skills while in prison.

One of the main objectives of the new partnership is to improve continuity of prisoners' learning when they leave custody. The new National Offender Management Service (NOMS) will help sharpen the focus on this vital area and implementation of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 as we move towards a new sentencing framework comprising both a custodial and a community element. Within that, we must foster an approach to learning and skills that meets the resettlement needs of offenders. As the ALI report points out, NOMS has the "great potential for marshalling all the services needed by each offender, including learning and job placement".

With this new context in mind, the Government warmly welcomes the ALI report as an important contribution to the work of improving the learning and skills of offenders. We are fully committed to addressing its findings, and we very much hope it will prove useful to staff working in the field as they consider how to improve delivery and results.

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**The report is published in parallel with a Government response, which sets out action that has been taken, or is planned, to address the issues raised by the ALI.*

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Executive summary

The National Probation Service (NPS) areas have developed literacy and numeracy provision for offenders in the community over a period of 18 months since the initiative was introduced. Some areas have been creative in bringing the initiative to life by establishing practices that form a sound basis for success. Some have achieved promising results in terms of the basic skills qualifications gained by offenders. However, most areas have so far failed to get to grips with the complexities of establishing and managing successful provision.

The main findings were:

- There are effective managers at NPS area level. They nevertheless lack a clear understanding of the purpose of the initiative and need guidance on how best to meet their targets.
- There is a lack of clear direction from the National Probation Directorate (NPD) to probation areas on what is expected of successful basic skills provision.
- The NPD has not made explicit enough links between the development of offenders' basic skills and its strategy for improving employability and reducing reoffending.
- The Home Office's service delivery agreement targets have been set without sufficient consideration of individual areas' needs and capabilities.
- Many NPS staff have a poor understanding of basic skills. Many are uninformed about the available methods of teaching literacy, numeracy and language.
- 'Fast Track', a basic skills initial screening technique developed by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), is an inappropriate tool for analysing the complex learning needs of offenders.
- Rates of referral to literacy, numeracy and language provision are low. When referral does occur, it is often too late for an offender to achieve a qualification before the end of their supervision order.
- The transfer of essential information, such as offenders' initial assessment results and outcomes of training or education in custody, is haphazard.
- Quality assurance of the literacy, numeracy and language provision for offenders in the community is inadequate.
- Some fruitful partnerships between NPS areas and training providers have been established.
- Much of the provision is inflexible and was not designed to meet offenders' specific needs. Learning is often disrupted or sporadic, making it difficult for offenders to establish rhythm and discipline.
- Attendance at basic skills sessions is seldom adequately monitored and controlled.
- Many areas provide too narrow a range of teaching methods and learning materials to engage inexperienced learners. Some of the accommodation is inappropriate for small group work.
- Co-ordination between local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), the NPS and providers in 2003-04 is often weak.
- Funding allocations for 2004-05 were unresolved at the time of the survey, making planning difficult for all those involved and placing staff retention at risk.
- The lack of clear decisions about the means of allocating funding and the scarcity of literacy, numeracy and language providers made it difficult to deliver Skills for Life in Wales.
- There are no basic literacy and numeracy qualifications available in Welsh.

summary

Recommendations

- The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has great potential for marshalling all the services needed by each offender, including learning and job placement. In order to fulfil that potential, its relationships with other interested bodies should be clarified and simplified, including confirmation of lines of commitment for expenditure.
- It should be considered whether delegation of funding through local LSCs should be delayed to enable comprehensive consideration to be given to the operating system for NOMS.
- NOMS should develop a strategic forum, bringing together all those agencies that can assist offender rehabilitation, including Jobcentre Plus, Ufi and the BSA (Basic Skills Agency).
- The NPD should set clear directions for the development of offenders' literacy, numeracy and language skills across England and Wales, linking improved literacy, numeracy and language skills with better prospects of employment and reduced reoffending.
- Each Probation Service area should be given a specific plan and targets for literacy, numeracy and language programmes which reflect the offender profile.
- Targets should measure milestones of achievement rather than simply qualifications and should relate to employment and reduced reoffending.
- Literacy, numeracy and language programmes should not be delivered in isolation. They should complement other strands of the Probation Service's work with offenders.
- More sophisticated tools should be introduced for assessing learning needs and reliable means should be developed for transferring assessment outcomes from custody.
- The acquisition of employability and basic skills should form an integral part of a detailed offender supervision plan. The links between sentence plans, individual learning plans and supervision plans should be explicit.
- The NPS should select appropriate learning materials and teaching programmes and encourage the use of a wider variety of appropriate teaching methods, including e-learning.
- Local LSCs should respond to specifically address the needs of offenders in their communities and should work with the NPS to develop a list of preferred providers who are expert in offering literacy, numeracy and language skills.
- The NPS should address the specific problems found in Wales, including those relating to Welsh speakers.
- A standard approach to quality assessment and improvement should be adopted, including regular self-assessment, use of the *Common Inspection Framework* and inspection by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI).

Background to the review

In November 2003, the Home Office commissioned the ALI to review the Probation Service's arrangements for basic skills provision in England and Wales. Targets for the achievement of basic skills qualifications had been set for each probation area, in response to the Government's Skills for Life agenda. The ALI's review was intended to identify the main barriers to successful provision; to identify areas of good practice; to highlight the potential for change in working practices or infrastructure and to recommend improvements. The context was the planned changes in arrangements for funding basic skills provision from April 2004, when local LSCs were to take responsibility for contracting arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language provision for offenders in the community.

Scope of the review

ALI inspectors visited 15 probation areas in England and two in Wales. The areas were selected to give good regional coverage and a balance between rural and urban areas. The areas included those that had already been identified as offering good practice, as well as some where the achievement rates for basic skills qualifications were low.

Inspectors evaluated provision wholly funded by the NPS and delivered by probation staff, as well as that offered by subcontracted providers from the private, voluntary and public sectors. They reviewed the funding arrangements set up by the NPS specifically for offenders, as well as for mainstream community programmes funded by local LSCs, the European Social Fund (ESF) or Jobcentre Plus, which explored the impact of the differing arrangements on the quality and sufficiency of provision.

Central to the review were local partnership arrangements: their purpose, responsiveness to the needs of offenders and effectiveness in assisting every provider to give of its best.

Inspectors consulted the NPD, the Basic Skills Agency, the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, the Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit, the LSC and local LSCs.

Some of the views that offenders offered to inspectors have been collated to give a personal perspective of offenders' experience (Appendix A). In addition, three examples of innovation in establishing successful basic skills provision identified by inspectors have been drawn together (Appendix B).

Detailed findings

1. **There are good managers in probation areas, who are capable of delivering objectives if given adequate information and guidance.** Many Probation Service managers are forging productive links with providers of literacy, numeracy and language training, or setting up their own provision. Many are working well towards their targets. However, they are given too little guidance and information on contracting and funding, on the best means of establishing their own programmes, and on the match between their work and the NPD's basic skills strategy.
2. **The strategic direction from the NPD is weak in terms of clearly linking the acquisition of employability and basic skills to reduced reoffending.** Previous studies commissioned by the NPD, such as the draft report on basic skills provision for offenders in Wales and an internal consultation paper on improving the basic skills of offenders on community sentences, have highlighted the links between improved basic skills and better job prospects. However, NPD has not made basic skills a required element of offending behaviour programmes. Some offenders do not have the literacy and numeracy skills they need to complete their offending behaviour programmes. Trainers on these programmes are seldom trained to teach literacy and numeracy and are often unfamiliar with the problems faced by offenders with weak basic skills. The NPD gives too little steer to Probation Service areas on how best they can meet, in practical terms, the full range of learners' needs.
3. **The Home Office has set service delivery agreement targets for probation areas that are too broad and do not fully consider individual areas' ability to meet these targets.** Targets have been set without sufficient consideration as to whether they are realistic or achievable. Some Probation Service areas have few specialist basic skills providers available to them. In many areas, staff have scant experience of contracting or locating additional funds to develop their provision. Time pressures on probation officers are already severe and casting around for help with basic skills is not the best use of this resource. The targets fail to recognise milestones in learners' achievement, such as regular attendance at sessions or good timekeeping. They also emphasise formal qualifications as an outcome, rather than finding a job and avoiding reoffending, which are the results most valued by offenders and by society at large.
4. **'Fast Track' is not an appropriate tool for screening the complex learning needs of offenders.** The 'Fast Track' method relies on offenders answering questions about their literacy, numeracy or language difficulties. Many are reluctant to do so. 'Fast Track' does not gauge offenders' writing ability and understanding of number problems or identify specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. The incomplete information available from 'Fast Track' causes inconsistencies in the evaluations made by probation staff and inconsistency in referrals to literacy, numeracy and language provision. What is needed is the use of more comprehensive initial assessment techniques, specifically designed for those who have complex and multiple learning needs.
5. **Rates of referral for basic skills provision are low. Probation areas are not responding to identified needs quickly enough.** If 'Fast Track' highlights a basic skills need, offenders are referred for more detailed assessment, from which an individual learning plan should be drawn up. In many cases, offenders are referred too late for them to achieve their qualification aim before the end of their supervision order. For many, training in basic skills is an 'add-on', not an integral part of a programme that aims to achieve employability and reduced reoffending.

findings

6. **The findings of initial assessment and information about any previous education or training are not systematically shared between the Prison Service and the Probation Service.** Many offenders have completed training or education in prison, some have already achieved qualifications, including literacy, numeracy or language qualifications. However, because relevant information is not routinely passed to the Probation Service, many offenders repeat tests or work towards qualifications they have already completed. The education and training records of prisoners released on licence are not available to probation officers or training providers.
7. **Basic skills provision for offenders in the community is not adequately quality assured.** Many probation areas have little idea of how to apply systems and procedures to assure the quality of training. They do not know what to look for in terms of assuring quality and they rely too heavily on the systems of training providers or the qualification awarding bodies. They have received inadequate guidance on how to measure performance against standards and how to develop procedures to ensure good-quality delivery.
8. **Some Probation Service areas have developed fruitful partnerships with training providers and other relevant agencies.** In some areas, funding opportunities have been maximised and related agencies have been encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of the Probation Service's role. Supportive partnerships forged with some county councils have generated considerable funds for the work carried out with offenders. Where Jobcentre Plus is involved, the most productive partnerships involve a clear allocation of responsibility to one member of the Probation Service as the link to the Jobcentre Plus office. Some Probation Service areas have established excellent links with local and national voluntary organisations. In those areas where training providers have been most usefully engaged, the literacy and numeracy work is sensibly contextualised so that basic skills learning complements other work. When the partnership between the Probation Service, the training provider and the offender is well co-ordinated, teaching of basic skills is seen as integral to the offender's total programme. Some providers give considerable support to offenders on basic skills programmes, effectively engaging them in the learning process, to the extent that some offenders continue with their training beyond the completion of their supervision order.
9. **Much of the basic skills provision is inflexible and fails to meet individual needs.** While many examples of good practice were found by inspectors, much of the training fails to adequately address the needs of offenders. The majority of probation areas contract their basic skills training to further education colleges, which run provision with a set structure of courses and timetables. Offenders are required to fit in with these established patterns, which often do not meet their needs. Offenders' support needs, both in practical and pastoral terms, are often not sufficiently considered. Many college-based courses, for instance, are arranged as a couple of hours a week during the day, term-time only. If an offender has problems with this arrangement, the opportunity to establish a pattern of regular learning is missed.
10. **The range of teaching methods and learning materials is narrow and some accommodation is poor.** There is little variety in the teaching methods used to engage offenders in their learning programmes. Over-reliance on handouts and paper-based information is particularly unsuited to offenders with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Very little learning is adapted so that it is relevant to offenders' experiences or linked to the compulsory elements of their programmes. The opportunities afforded by the use of information technology and multimedia to enhance the learning experience are seldom exploited. Many basic skills sessions are held in Probation Service

offices that, while convenient for offenders, are not always comfortable or conducive to learning. Tutors often have to carry around their equipment from one venue or room to another. Rooms are sometimes cramped, rarely dedicated for teaching purposes and often have inappropriate desks and chairs for effective learning. This gives some learners the perception that basic skills sessions are not valued by those organising them and reinforces the idea that basic skills are an 'add on'.

11. **Very little basic skills training is integrated with other programmes undertaken by offenders.** In most Probation Service areas, literacy, numeracy and language training is given in isolation from offending behaviour or vocational training programmes. Where basic skills teaching is integrated well, offenders see its relevance to their other work. Integration helps to avoid the stigma often associated with the need to acquire basic skills.
12. **Co-ordination between local LSCs, the NPS and providers is weak.** The importance of the protocol established between the LSC and the NPS in May 2003 is not widely appreciated by basic skills staff in the Probation Service. Many Probation Service areas have developed their own provision or contracted with training providers. However, their arrangements have often taken little or no account of the quality of training given by these providers. There is duplication of provision in some areas and insufficient in others. In some local LSCs, staff have little involvement with the Probation Service and have not provided much support or guidance to help develop good-quality training provision. Probation staff do not routinely use information sources such as inspection reports on training providers and colleges, in order to judge the quality of training on offer.
13. **The future funding arrangements for basic skills provision are unclear.** From April 2004, additional funding has been made available for training through the LSC. However, for many of the organisations contracted to deliver training for the Probation Service, there was a lack of clarity about the likelihood of a contract for the coming year at the time of the survey. This uncertainty is compounded by their concerns regarding the LSC's requirements for self-assessment, inspection and quality monitoring. The preferred supplier status applied by some local LSCs is not clear to them. Although some of these providers have an established record of successful work with the Probation Service, the anxiety generated by their uncertain future is starting to have an impact on their relationship with the Probation Service and their ability to retain staff.
14. **There is no co-ordinating funding body for Wales and few specialist providers of basic skills training.** The absence of a co-ordinating funding body is hampering the development of basic skills provision for offenders in Wales. The fragmented nature of the infrastructure to support the basic skills agenda has resulted in few basic skills providers in Wales. Probation Service areas in Wales have no dedicated basic skills teams and no basic skills 'champions'. The lack of a coherent drive to deliver the Skills for Life agenda has led to a failure to develop the systems and procedures required to effectively manage and deliver literacy, numeracy and language training.
15. **No literacy or numeracy qualifications are offered in Welsh.** Offenders in North and West Wales who speak Welsh as their first language struggle to complete an initial assessment and then follow qualifications in English. Few learning materials are translated into Welsh. Given the lack of available qualifications in Welsh, probation areas sensibly offer training in English as an additional language to facilitate offenders gaining qualifications.

Appendices

Appendix A

Offenders' views

Many of those interviewed referred to their initial apprehension about attending literacy and numeracy sessions. However, in the majority of cases, this feeling quickly dissipated as offenders realised the potential benefits of their learning. Some of the positive aspects most frequently mentioned were:

- the gains in self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation that offenders experienced
- the personal attention, support, guidance and feedback given by tutors
- the sensitive recognition of individual needs by many tutors
- being able to work towards an award or qualification
- attending an awards ceremony at the end of the course
- learning from fellow offenders and giving mutual support
- being helped with transport to the provision
- having access to computers
- being encouraged to progress to further training or to gain employment.

Areas in which offenders thought that improvements could be made were:

- the courses were not always appropriate for people who already had qualifications such as general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs)
- the guidance on what to tell potential employers about offences was not always sufficient
- two hours a week was not enough training time for some offenders
- the fixed times of training sessions restricted access for some offenders
- learning was sometimes disrupted by factors such as frequent changes in college tutors and probation officers
- tuition was not always provided during college holiday periods.

Appendix B

Examples of innovation in establishing successful basic skills provision

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Cambridgeshire Probation Service works productively with Cambridgeshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to raise staff awareness of Skills for Life, the Government's strategy on training in literacy, numeracy and the use of language.

The LSC has funded Cambridgeshire County Council to employ two part-time sessional trainers in literacy, numeracy and language. These trainers work on board the 'Nacro Navigator' bus – a mobile learning centre sponsored by the national crime reduction charity. The Nacro Navigator has six networked computers, as well as a number of laptops, on which users can access computer-based training packages and the internet. The use of the bus enables staff in geographically remote areas to benefit from the technology. The bus is also an online testing centre.

Since April 2003, probation officers have each been offered four half-days of LSC-funded training aboard the Nacro Navigator. The training has improved the officers' understanding of Skills for Life initiatives, and increased their knowledge and understanding of how to deliver effective literacy and numeracy training to offenders and ex-offenders. Training for officers has included sessions on:

- appropriate teaching methods
- how to recognise and adapt to different learning styles
- how best to make use of information technology to develop offenders' skills
- background information on national testing and assessment methods.

GREATER MANCHESTER

In July 2003, Greater Manchester Police Authority (GMPA) submitted a proposal to Greater Manchester Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to offer a training programme to improve offenders' literacy and numeracy skills.

The programme aims to prepare offenders for tests for nationally accredited qualifications in literacy and numeracy through improvement of their literacy and numeracy skills and test practice. They can take the test at a probation office within a month of starting the programme. The offenders benefit from individual attention, given in a 'no pressure' setting. Being able to take a practice test boosts the confidence of many offenders, for whom sitting formal tests is very stressful.

Offenders with no qualifications, but who did not appear to have significant literacy and numeracy problems, were selected to participate in the pilot programme. Twenty offenders were on the literacy programme and 23 learners were on the numeracy programme. Of these, 16 learners on each programme completed all the target activities and were entered for the appropriate test. Ten learners took the literacy test and eight passed it. Eleven learners took the numeracy test and 10 passed it. Of those learners who took the tests, 86 per cent passed. GMPA investigated the reasons for the absence of those learners entered for tests who did not take them and found that all of them had good reasons for non-attendance. For example, some learners were ill, some would have been in breach of their order if they had attended and others were in court.

Appendices

When the 'Moving On' programme was proposed, it was GMPA's intention to offer it only to offenders on community orders who scored seven or more on the Fast Track initial screening test. Since the pilot has completed, the 'Moving On' programme has been extended to include:

- released prisoners on licence
- released prisoners on resettlement programmes

LONDON

Education for Success Limited (EfS) is a small, private training provider that contracts with the London Probation Service. The company operates in the north, east and west of London. EfS specialises in supporting learners with dyslexia.

EfS carries out a comprehensive initial assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy skills, using the Basic Skills Agency's assessment and additional elements to determine learners' reading age and preferred learning styles.

The company collects information about offenders' prior learning, any literacy and numeracy support they have received previously and whether they have a history of dyslexia or other learning difficulties and/or disabilities. EfS also collects data about learners' ethnicity, gender and age. This information forms the basis of individual learning plans that take into account offenders' specific experiences and needs.

EfS shares the information about offenders' learning needs with staff at the Probation Service, using terminology that is easily understandable to non-specialists. Probation Service staff now have a greater understanding of offenders' learning difficulties and are able to design programmes of learning that meet individual needs more closely.



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