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Research and analysis

# The quality of reading education in prisons: one year on

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# Foreword by Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Ofsted

In 2022, Ofsted published jointly with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) ['Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons'](#). I am pleased to present this updated review of prison reading education, a year on. It builds on the insights and recommendations of our original review and reflects our commitment to monitoring progress and bringing about positive change in prison education.

The significance of high-quality reading education in prisons cannot be overstated. It can be a transformative force, giving prisoners the chance to develop crucial literacy skills, expand their knowledge and find pleasure in learning. Equipping prisoners with reading skills allows them to embark on a path towards rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

In our previous report, we emphasised the vital importance of effective reading education programmes in prisons. We highlighted the importance of using qualified and skilled teachers to teach phonics programmes to prisoners with rudimentary reading skills. We also emphasised the value of partnerships between prisons, prison education providers and other stakeholders. These ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to reading education. In this updated review, we present our findings on the progress prisons have made over the past year.

We recognise that the prison sector has been through challenging times during the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic disruption. We know prisons are also

experiencing significant staffing problems. It has not been an easy environment in which to make the necessary improvements to reading education.

We are pleased to see now that nearly all prisons we inspected have acknowledged the importance of reading, and that this is reflected in most cases in a reading strategy. We are also pleased to see that many prisons have strengthened their relationship with the [Shannon Trust](#). Some have provided appropriate training for education staff in using phonics programmes.

However, there is more work to do to meet the recommendations we made last year. For example, staff shortages still limit the quality of reading education in most prisons. Prison staff do not get enough training in how to support prisoners who are learning to read.

In this review, we found that prisons need to offer more support for the many prisoners learning English as a second or subsequent language.

We will continue to scrutinise the quality of reading education in prisons through further reviews. High-quality reading education should play a central role in unlocking prisoners' potential, enabling them to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the prisons, prison education providers and dedicated professionals who have participated in this review.

## **Foreword by Charlie Taylor, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons**

It is now more than a year since HMIP and Ofsted published their joint report into the teaching of reading in prisons. This highlighted a widespread failure and lack of ambition in reducing the staggeringly high levels of illiteracy among prisoners. Illiteracy was interfering with their daily life in prison and affecting their ability to get work. Most importantly, it was limiting their chances of staying out of trouble when they came out.

During the thematic review, prisons were recovering from the pandemic lockdowns and continuing to operate very reduced regimes. Disappointingly, this remains the case in far too many prisons. Recent HMIP inspections have been highly critical of the amount of time prisoners are spending locked up and the lack of purposeful activity.

It is in this context that we are publishing this review of progress. It shows that things have not improved at anything like the rate that Ofsted and HMIP would have expected. Although prisons are now required to have a reading strategy, many we have seen have been generic and created by the education provider without enough input or commitment from prison leaders. We have less confidence that prisoners will make progress in these prisons, than in the rarer prisons where improving reading is being driven by the governor, in partnership with the education provider. Too few teachers in prisons have been trained in teaching prisoners to read using systematic synthetic phonics. In many places, there are not enough specialist staff. This means that teaching early reading is often left to third-sector organisations, such as the [Shannon Trust](#), whose mentors are dependent on prison staff getting prisoners unlocked.

Our report was not just about non-readers; it recommended that reading became an integral part of prison life, for pleasure as well as for practical reasons. In our follow-up work, we have seen some examples where this is taking place, often driven by librarians or other interested staff members. We have also seen some new heads of learning and skills begin to develop prison-wide reading, but progress remains slow.

Ofsted and HMIP will keep returning to this subject, because we know the absolute importance of reading. We expect to see greater commitment from education providers and prison leaders in a reorientation of prisons towards putting improving literacy at the heart of what they do.

## Background

Ofsted and HMIP jointly published [‘Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons’](#) in March 2022. The review included recommendations for His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and its prison governors and set out how Ofsted and HMIP would respond. Ofsted committed to looking at the quality of reading education, and support for those who are learning to read, during its inspections. Our renewed focus on reading in inspections started on 1 October 2022. We anticipated that this starting date would give prisons time to consider and act on our recommendations.

This report sets out the progress our inspectors found in relation to each of our recommendations to HMPPS and its prison governors. We considered evidence from inspections between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023.

Prisoners can access education and vocational training courses, as well as work,

while in prison. In public prisons, and a few of the private ones, 4 colleges provide the education and most of the vocational training courses available, under the prison education framework contract. Private prisons can set up their own contracts for educational and vocational training.

The Shannon Trust is a charitable organisation that helps non-readers and those with low reading skills to learn to read or improve their reading. The Trust is present in many prisons.

## Context

Between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023, Ofsted and HMIP inspected 24 prisons in England. These included:

- 3 category A adult male prisons
- 9 category B adult male prisons
- 8 category C adult male prisons
- 1 category D adult male prison
- 2 adult female prisons
- 1 young male offender institution

Of these, 12 were judged inadequate, 10 requires improvement, and 2 good for overall effectiveness.

During this period of inspection, prison leaders reported staff shortages, which led to disrupted and limited regimes. Most prison leaders reported severe shortages of prison officers. Education managers reported difficulties in recruiting qualified English teachers. This situation had a significant negative impact on the frequency and breadth of the education, skills and work prisons offered. It is in this context, of limited and weak provision across prisons, that progress in improving prisoners' reading levels must be viewed.

Prison leaders were slow to reinstate education, skills and work activities after the disruption of the pandemic. Two of the most recent inspections show signs that the quality of education is improving, but progress in improving reading remains slow.

This report sets out the recommendations from 'Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons', followed by our findings about progress made in relation to each of these.

# Recommendations and progress

## Recommendations around assessment

**Recommendation for HMPPS:** there should be initial and continuing assessments that pinpoint the knowledge and skills in reading that prisoners are missing or need to improve.

**Recommendation for governors:** leaders should use appropriate interventions that support reading, and systems to assess, monitor and share information on reading ability and progress.

**Progress:** HMPPS and its prison governors have made slow progress against these recommendations.

It is important to assess the reading skills of all prisoners, not just those who attend education, early on, so that they can receive appropriate help to learn to read or improve their reading.

Prisoners can generally choose to attend education, vocational training or work in prison. As a result, only those who choose to attend education or training sessions will have their reading skills assessed. The reading skills of prisoners who do not choose education remain largely unknown.

However, there are problems with testing prisoners who opt for education. During most of the period under review, most prison managers used only general assessments of prisoners' starting points in English. These did not give enough information about prisoners' reading ability. In addition, staff did not always check that prisoners could read the assessment itself. Only by the end of March 2023 did prison leaders have access to an initial assessment tool designed to identify clearly prisoners' reading skills. A few prisons that we inspected were piloting the tool during the induction of prisoners. It was too early to see any impact.

A few prisons used more appropriate diagnostic assessments of prisoners' reading skills. In these prisons, education staff were beginning to gather some useful information about the reading skills of prisoners who attend education. For example, some English teachers gained a better understanding of prisoners' reading levels by

asking them to read aloud from texts with appropriate vocabulary and font size. Some prisoners in these classes were supported to improve their reading skills.

In most cases, however, leaders did not make sure that non-readers were given the teaching and support they needed. They neither monitored the progress prisoners made nor intervened when prisoners made slow progress.

## Recommendation for the curriculum

**Recommendation for HMPPS:** There should be a distinct part of the curriculum offer dedicated to teaching reading.

**Progress:** HMPPS has made slow progress against this recommendation.

The reading curriculum is still not given sufficient priority. There are too few classes available to help prisoners improve their reading skills. Access to classes is irregular and often insufficient.

Prison leaders have not established clear pathways to help prisoners improve their reading skills. They have not provided enough courses at pre-entry level for non-readers and emerging readers. Prison leaders have started to give more priority to teaching reading greater priority in entry to level 2 English classes.

In 15 prisons inspected, a shortage of qualified English teachers made it difficult to provide reading lessons. A combination of poor teaching and irregular access to education meant that prisoners did not develop or practise their reading skills in order to gain fluency in these cases. In many prisons, a shortage of staff meant that prisoners relied on peer mentors to provide individual support in class. This support was not of a consistently high standard.

In the few cases where education providers offered dedicated reading classes, there were waiting lists. Some prison leaders have recognised this problem, and plan to expand provision once they have recruited qualified staff. It is too early to assess the impact of the plans.

In a few prisons, teachers taught reading in existing English functional skills courses, rather than in separate, pre-entry-level classes. Some teachers in these classes taught reading well, using systematic synthetic phonics. They helped prisoners to

break up words into sounds to help with reading, and to build up sounds into words when spelling. Teachers in these cases also provided opportunities for prisoners to read aloud, and to gain confidence and fluency.

Many English teachers, however, did not focus enough on improving reading. They did not always measure prisoners' progress accurately and effectively. For example, some teachers relied too heavily on past examination papers and not enough on developing essential reading skills. Prisoners are demotivated by such approaches, and do not make substantial progress.

Most improvements in prisoners' reading have been through the work of the Shannon Trust and in some English classes in education. There has been little or no progress in reading in workshops and the wider prison environment, such as on the wings.

One or two prisons have made rudimentary attempts to support reading in vocational training and at work. For example, one prison has established reading corners in a workshop. Another has introduced a 10-minute break in workshop time to allow reading for pleasure. However, most prison leaders have not yet considered how to improve reading outside of education.

Leaders do not have an agreed approach to written communication and instructions across the prison, to make it easier for emerging or weaker readers to understand them. As a result, prisoners who struggle to read find it difficult to navigate basic aspects of prison life, such as ordering food and completing canteen sheets.

### **The role of the Shannon Trust in teaching reading**

Most prison leaders have established or renewed a relationship with the Shannon Trust. We saw a growing number of Shannon Trust administrators and voluntary prisoner mentors in the prisons we visited. In many prisons, leaders relied solely on the Shannon Trust to teach prisoners who cannot read or are emerging readers.

One prison now employs a Shannon Trust coordinator, who communicates well with the education provider. The coordinator is planning a pathway that will lead readers from the Shannon Trust programme to the main curriculum taught by the education provider.

However, in most cases, collaboration between the Shannon Trust and prison education providers was in its early stages. Only a few prisoners progressed from the Shannon Trust's pre-entry-level reading course to the English functional skills courses run by prison education providers. Too often, leaders and managers did not monitor the progress prisoners made with the Shannon Trust. They did not ensure



that further English education helped prisoners to continue improving their reading once they had completed the Shannon Trust course.

In some prisons, there was not enough Shannon Trust provision to meet prisoners' needs. Despite this, very few prison leaders had established extra classes to help the weakest readers to improve their reading. As a result, these prisoners did not have enough opportunities to learn to read.

In other prisons, Shannon Trust mentors had sufficient capacity to support many prisoners, but they were not given enough time or spaces to meet prisoners. In some cases, prison leaders did not make sure prisoners were allocated effectively to the Shannon Trust. In these prisons, the number of prisoners who learned to read was low and below the capacity of the Shannon Trust mentors.

## Recommendation about strategy

**Recommendation for governors:** each governor should have an ambitious strategy to improve prisoners' reading skills.

**Progress:** although most governors now have reading strategies in place, they have not made enough progress in implementing the strategies.

Twenty-one out of 24 prison leaders had adopted a reading strategy. Prison governors understood the importance of improving reading. In most reading strategies, leaders correctly identified that the prison should prioritise non- and emerging readers and teach reading in and beyond formal education. In some prisons, the Shannon Trust and library staff had also usefully been included in policy development. But in all prisons, the reading strategy had only been implemented very recently and had not yet had much impact.

Leaders did not support the ambition of the reading strategy with the required level of detail in their action plans. Senior leaders underestimated the scale of the task. Many did not involve prison staff more widely in developing the reading strategy. Leaders have much work to do to implement the reading strategy throughout prisons. Most prisoners were unaware of the reading strategy or the opportunities to improve their reading.

Often, leaders gave prisoners incentives for achieving level 1 and level 2 qualifications in English. However, the lack of regularity in the prison regimes meant that prisoners' attendance at these classes remained low. Leaders had not provided direct incentives to encourage the lowest-level readers to participate in early reading courses. Education was offered part time, which meant that full-time work activities were more attractive to prisoners, as the total pay was higher, even if the hourly rate was the same.

## Recommendation about training

**Recommendation for HMPPS:** there should be specialist training and development for teachers and trainers on teaching adults to read.

**Progress:** HMPPS and governors have made limited progress against this recommendation.

Most prison leaders understand the importance of using systematic synthetic phonics to teach reading. They recognise that most teachers and instructors need some training in this way of teaching reading. However, too few prisons have provided this. In fact, most prisons provided too little training of any kind to improve teachers' subject knowledge or teaching skills.

Even when training was provided, it had not been extended to staff beyond those employed by the education providers. The lack of specialist training had a negative impact on the quality of teaching and choice of curriculum content. Only a few teachers, mainly in English education, knew how to use phonics to teach and support reading.

Some teachers confused reading with comprehension. They assumed, wrongly, that if a prisoner could answer a question correctly, they could read and understand all the text. Because of continuing weaknesses in curriculum design and teaching, there has not yet been a significant improvement in prisoners' reading skills.

## Recommendation about libraries

**Recommendation for governors:** the library should promote reading for pleasure and purpose effectively and provide appropriate texts for adults who are learning to read.

**Progress:** governors have made limited progress against this recommendation.

There were functioning libraries in all the prisons we visited. In many cases, library staff were very keen to help prisoners to learn to read. However, prisoners' access to libraries was often severely limited. Only 51% of male and 44% of female prisoners said they could visit their prison library at least once a week. Concerningly, 29% of male and 39% of female prisoners said that they never visited the library. Shortages of prison officers meant that planned library visits were often cancelled.

Libraries were rarely open at weekends or in the evenings. Opening times were often too short or clashed with other activities. One prison had responded to the underuse of the library by opening it at weekends, when it was staffed by prisoner peer workers.

During the pandemic, some prisoners could order books to be delivered to them on the wings. Disappointingly, this helpful system had stopped or waned by the time of our inspections. Only around a quarter of prisoners said they could have library materials delivered to them weekly. Wings in some prisons did have a small supply of books, but these were not rotated frequently and did not contain a wide enough variety of reading materials to meet prisoners' needs.

In prisons where more progress had been made, prisoners who attended education classes visited the library every week. In some cases, library staff worked closely with education staff to stock the library with books of an appropriate level for adults who are just beginning to read. These library staff helped prisoners to choose appropriate books to read. Prisoners who attend these libraries found a welcoming environment and were supported by enthusiastic staff.

Library staff in some prisons had established initiatives such as book clubs and reading challenges. These helped prisoners to improve their reading skills, read for pleasure and develop family ties. These are clearly important aspirations. So far, though, only a very small proportion of the prison population has benefited from such initiatives.

# Reading education for prisoners who are speakers of other languages

Our first review of reading education in prisons did not comment separately on reading education for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). However, our recent review of inspection evidence indicates that prison leaders have been slow to meet these prisoners' needs.

Teaching these prisoners requires specialist knowledge and skills. Staffing shortages in this area have a severe impact on prisoners with ESOL needs. Their poor command of English means they are particularly vulnerable within prisons. Prisons rarely provide ESOL classes, and general English classes are usually taught by teachers with little or no expertise in ESOL.

Many prisons used inappropriate initial assessments for these prisoners. In some cases, this meant that prisoners were allocated to activities without the language support that they needed. Some simply did not participate in activities.

A few prisoners with ESOL needs were allocated to work in areas where they could not read the work instructions. They did not receive the support they needed at work. These prisoners relied too heavily on fellow prisoners for support and guidance.

In education classes, too few prisoners with ESOL needs were given the support they required to improve their reading. Teachers frequently concentrated on improving speaking and listening skills but did not dedicate sufficient time to improving reading. Sometimes, teachers used Shannon Trust mentors to support prisoners with ESOL needs. Despite their best efforts, mentors did not have the expertise to support these prisoners.

In prison libraries, there were not enough reading materials for speakers of other languages. The selection of foreign language texts was very limited, and these were often not in the languages spoken in the prison population.

## New recommendations

Governors should implement an effective reading strategy for their prisons without further delay.

Leaders should rapidly ensure that prisoners' reading skills are properly assessed. They should accurately establish the reading levels of the prison population and ensure that there are sufficient classes at the appropriate levels to improve prisoners' reading skills.

Leaders should improve their understanding of prisoners' progress in reading through more effective information-sharing and collaborations with the Shannon Trust (or similar organisations). They should increase the number of prisoners who progress into education, skills and work.

Governors should ensure that there is enough time and space for properly trained mentors to support prisoners with their reading.

Governors should consider providing incentives for prisoners to attend early reading courses and initiatives.

Governors should improve access to their prison libraries and develop initiatives to promote reading throughout the prison.

Leaders should significantly increase the number of teachers and trainers who can use systematic synthetic phonics to improve prisoners' reading skills in the classrooms and workshops, and in the prison more widely.

Governors and curriculum managers should urgently improve the initial assessment, support and teaching for prisoners with ESOL needs so that they make better progress in their reading and thrive in their prisons.

## Methodology

Ofsted and HMIP worked jointly on this review.

Ofsted reviewed the evidence bases and final reports for 24 inspections that took place between October 2022 and 31 March 2023, to:

- judge the progress that prison leaders had made in dealing with the recommendations from the first review
- identify any new areas of good or poor practice in relation to improving the reading levels of prisoners

HMIP reviewed its evidence bases and final reports for the same 24 inspections. HMIP's contribution focused on the roles of library staff and facilities in improving prisoners' reading levels.

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