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Research and analysis

A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions: the systemic shortcomings that fail children

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Applies to England

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Foreword by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills

I am pleased to introduce our review of the quality of education in young offender institutions (YOIs), which we carried out jointly with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP). HMIP and Ofsted are concerned about the declining quality of education in YOIs over the past decade. Many of the children in these institutions are extremely vulnerable. They are in urgent need of high-quality education: at

present, the system has already failed them and continues to do so at this most urgent and crucial point in their life.

We are particularly worried about the decline in teachers' ability to manage the behaviour of children in YOIs. We are also concerned about children's access to education. They spend far too long locked in their cells. It cannot be right that some children spend up to 23 hours each day alone in their cells with no access to education or other pursuits that might improve their chances of rehabilitation and successful future lives. A lack of access to education seriously reduces their quality of life and future life chances. YOI leaders do need to ensure their institutions are safe, but they must also find a way to improve children's access to education.

It is very important that children in YOIs benefit from a broad curriculum at the right level, including in reading. They need expert teachers who can plan the curriculum well, use effective, evidence-based teaching methods and manage behaviour effectively. They also need well-resourced classrooms. At present, many of these things are in very short supply in our YOIs.

We recognise that children in YOIs are some of the most vulnerable children and learners that we encounter in our work. Not only are they deprived of their liberty, but they also have hugely complex social, behavioural and educational needs.

These children need to receive a substantial, high-quality education that enables them to catch up on their missed schooling, and thus be better prepared for the future. It is our duty to ensure that they do.

While we acknowledge the challenges that leaders and managers must navigate in these establishments, these children deserve to access a full education through a purposeful and productive day taught by experienced and able teachers. Anything less would be an injustice.

Sir Martyn Oliver

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills

Foreword by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons

The findings in this report make for depressing reading. Many of the children who end up in custody have had a very disrupted education. We often come across children who have not been in school for many years because they have been excluded or have truanted. Many have learning difficulties or other neurodivergent needs.

Their time in custody should be a golden opportunity to begin to fill in some of these educational gaps – assess what they need to learn and provide high-quality teaching so that, when they leave, they are in a better position to avoid a return to custody.

Too often, our colleagues in Ofsted find that attendance is very low, behaviour is not good enough, the curriculum is not suitable and the quality of teaching is poor. We need to see a transformation in the quality of education in our YOIs if we want to see less youth crime and more children going on to lead successful lives.

Charlie Taylor
His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons

Executive summary

This report summarises our chief concerns about regimes at England's YOIs. This type of secure accommodation holds convicted children aged 15 to 18. The report draws on Ofsted and HMIP's 32 full inspection reports, and 5 reports following independent reviews of progress, across a 10-year period from June 2014 to March 2024. It also draws on comments from surveys of young offenders in custody, comments from leaders at education providers, YOI leaders and managers, and inspectors' comments and findings.

The review sets out a bleak picture of steadily declining educational opportunities and quality, reduced work experience and work opportunities, and sharply reduced time out of cell for children. In the worst case, in one setting some children had only half an hour out of their locked cells per day.

We report on poor relationships between education providers and YOI leaders, poor-quality resources and infrastructure, severe staff shortages and low levels of qualifications and training among staff. These factors result in children receiving a poor education that fails to meet their needs.

Children have far fewer hours of lessons per day than their counterparts outside the secure estate. They have lower levels of attendance at classes, usually for reasons beyond their control. Because staff lack proper training, they cannot meet the needs of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Work experience opportunities and links to employers have become more limited during the past 10 years. This means that children are poorly prepared for their release and generally lack the skills and training that might help them to secure employment.

Chief among reasons for the poor quality of education is the fact that YOIs are struggling with severe staff shortages. This makes it difficult for staff to build relationships with children and maintain order. They rely on very complicated regimes that keep large numbers of children separate from each other.

Restrictive regimes mean that staff do not release children from cells to attend work or training. A vicious cycle develops whereby children are isolated, disheartened and frustrated, then develop poor behaviours that lead to further restrictions being imposed.

Poor leadership and poor cooperation between education providers and YOI

leaders mean that, across the past 10 years, leaders and managers have put in place very few effective and sustainable measures to deal with the rapidly declining standards at YOIs.

Background

During the period June 2014 to March 2024, there were 4 YOIs in England which housed children in custody who aged 15 to 18:

- Cookham Wood, in Kent [\[footnote 1\]](#)
- Feltham A, in London
- Werrington, in Staffordshire
- Wetherby and Keppel Unit, in Yorkshire [\[footnote 2\]](#)

At their most recent inspections, they held the following number of children:

YOI	Inspection	No of children held	Operational capacity [footnote 3]
Cookham Wood	April 2023	77	120
Feltham A	March 2024	79	120
Werrington	August 2023	89	92
Wetherby and Keppel Unit	December 2023	165 [footnote 4]	266

Children living in YOIs have often had a disrupted education. Many have very low levels of literacy for their age, and the large majority have also experienced either temporary or permanent school exclusion. [\[footnote 5\]](#) [\[footnote 6\]](#) Data provided by the Youth Custody Service (YCS) for this review shows that, typically, over half of children in custody have SEND. [\[footnote 7\]](#)

While in custody, children should have access to and participate in full-time education and/or work activities. This can include work and study in the community, through day release. Involvement in full-time education and/or work while in custody helps children to fill the significant gaps in their knowledge, skills and behaviours that have developed through missed or disrupted schooling. Study and training also prepare them for their next steps, which may include further study and work opportunities.

Education and work play a crucial role in children’s rehabilitation. They provide children with the tools they need to reintegrate successfully into society, and to

develop meaningful work and study goals. However, over the last decade, the quality of education provided to children in custody has worsened. Too often, even the very basic aspects of educational provision, such as enough hours of classes being available, or children being escorted to lessons on time, are not in place.

This review explores the systemic failings in both leadership and the quality of education at YOIs that have led to this decline.

Context

During the time period covered by this report, Ofsted and HMIP jointly inspected the 4 YOIs a total of 37 times. This comprised 32 full inspections and 5 independent reviews of progress (IRPs).

At their most recent full inspections, 1 YOI was graded requires improvement (Wetherby and Keppel Unit), and 3 were graded inadequate for overall effectiveness by Ofsted (Werrington, Feltham A, Cookham Wood).

None of the 4 YOIs has been graded good for overall effectiveness under the education inspection framework, which was introduced in custodial settings in early 2020. A table showing full inspection outcomes for the period 2014 to 2024 is in Annex A of this report.

Ofsted's findings on systemic leadership failings

Leaders do not make sure that children spend enough time in education classes, and do not make sure that lessons are free from disruption

According to YOI rules, children in the YOIs are meant to receive at least 15 hours of education per week. However, information provided by GOV.UK suggests that the educational provision for children in YOIs is equivalent to the provision for other children in full-time education. For example, according to GOV.UK, children at Werrington are 'offered 30 hours of education a week', and those at Feltham can access an education service that is 'open 5 days a week'.[\[footnote 8\]](#)

The reality is that children often have access to far fewer hours of education. For example, at recent inspections, inspectors have found that many children receive only 10 to 13 hours of education per week. If they are particularly vulnerable and cannot join mainstream classes, then this amount is likely to be much reduced. The shortfalls in hours have often been caused by a lack of staff in the education

provision and in the YOI as a whole. Many lessons have been cancelled because there is either no teacher, or no officer to escort children to their lessons.

It is only in a small number of YOIs, including YOIs where staff turnover remains a problem, that leaders and managers ensure that children have a weekly timetable that is closer to typical full-time education hours.

Lessons that are scheduled have too frequently been curtailed or interrupted. Leaders and managers have prioritised activities other than education. For example, children miss part or all of lessons to attend reviews, visit the chapel or have their allotted exercise time.

Being significantly late for class has become the norm. Children are escorted to classes up to an hour and a half late, and finish early because officers arrive to collect them before the scheduled end of lessons. This makes it difficult for teachers to plan curriculums well, because they do not have control over when their lessons start and finish, or which children will be attending them.

In many cases, delays in getting children to lessons are due to staggered 'movements' from wings to education departments. These movements are designed to keep groups of children apart from one another on the way to and from classes, to avoid the risk of fights. However, despite these strategies, levels of violence are often still high.[\[footnote 9\]](#)

Leaders from the YCS acknowledged that there have been too many 'keep-aparts'.[\[footnote 10\]](#) They also commented that the unhelpful layout of buildings designated for education made it more difficult to manage conflict. For example, long rows of classrooms with windows into corridors meant that children could see one another arriving, which could lead to further conflict. Leaders accepted that improvements were needed to ensure that children arrived at lessons in a timelier manner.

When allocating children to courses, YOI staff have not focused closely enough on the subjects that meet children's educational needs

In YOIs, staff usually meet at an 'allocations board' (or similar) to assign children to courses or work activities. Allocations should be based on children's current educational attainment, their future career and study goals, and their interests. In earlier inspections covered as part of this report, this principle was usually the cornerstone of allocating children to courses.

Instead, over the last decade, a culture has developed whereby YOI leaders use allocation processes as a way of managing problems with violence and conflict. Staff almost always allocate children to courses based mainly on which other offenders they can mix with and which they need to be kept apart from, or on the wing in which they live. Rather than being used in exceptional cases, which would

be understandable, 'keep-aparts' and restrictions based on wing locations have become the standard way to allocate children to courses.

Education teams at YOIs generally offer course pathways. These provide children with career-specific courses, such as in construction or catering. However, the pathways are too often used poorly. This is because, as noted above, the staff who allocate them do not prioritise educational needs and aspirations when deciding which children do which courses. In a not untypical example, inspectors recently reported on a YOI where children who had been studying construction at college were placed on to a barbering course, with no educational rationale for this.

In the following section, we refer to substantial behavioural issues in YOI classrooms. These are exacerbated by the inadequate allocation processes. Too often, children are enrolled on courses that they do not want or need to study, or that involve them in a substantial shift of direction. They are not motivated to pay attention during lessons or to complete work, and they do not show appropriate respect for teachers.

When asked about the challenges in allocating children to courses, education leaders recognised the shortcomings in their current approach. They commented that YOI managers often use education classes to get children out of their rooms, rather than putting them on courses that match their needs and career aspirations.

YCS managers and YOI managers have focused on keeping children safe. This has led to higher numbers of 'keep-aparts' and resulting restrictions in the education courses that children are allocated. YCS managers felt that this problem has been exacerbated because YOIs now hold a higher concentration of violent offenders. However, leaders also recognised that the situation needs to improve, so that children attend education courses that match their needs well and offer them some hope of a clear career pathway.

Leaders and managers do not have effective enough strategies for managing children's challenging behaviour

Current strategies for managing behaviour at YOIs rely too heavily on keeping children apart from one another, or on excluding children from classes. Teachers often lack training and support to deal appropriately with challenging behaviour.

This was not always the case. In the earlier inspections that are part of this review, which took place before 2017, inspectors found that teachers had a good knowledge of how to manage behavioural issues. They used reflection rooms and cool-down periods to help children swiftly return to class.

The decline in leaders', managers' and teachers' ability to manage children's behaviour became evident 5 to 6 years ago. Since then, inspectors have found frequent instances of low-level bad behaviour in lessons. This behaviour disrupts teachers' attempts to teach curriculums, wastes scarce lesson time and frustrates

children who want to study.

In too many cases, teachers struggle to maintain control of the classroom. Children openly defy them. Some children direct sexualised and racist language towards staff. They threaten peers and occasionally teachers with physical violence. Sometimes their violent actions seriously disrupt or halt lessons, and lead to damaged classrooms. In these instances, teachers are unable to challenge the children, and are fearful of doing so.

In a minority of cases, children have more positive attitudes. This is because teachers have had the necessary training to tackle poor behaviour. It is also because leaders and teachers set clear guidelines for behaviour in lessons. They reward children for good behaviour and sanction poor behaviour. In these cases, inspectors have also noted the positive impact of youth workers on children's behaviour.

When questioned about the challenges of children's behaviour in education departments, education providers noted the impact of staffing and regime difficulties. They described a lack of consistency in the presence of officers in education departments. This meant that, when dealing with behavioural issues, the levels of support that teachers received from officers varied too much.

Education providers also commented that there was more work to do with the wider YOI to tackle poor and disruptive behaviour. Providers felt that it would be beneficial to work with YOI colleagues in a 'case conference' style, to help everyone understand the difficulties faced by the most challenging children.

However, education providers also recognised the need to tackle ingrained cultural problems in their own departments, such as some long-serving teachers and trainers accepting poor behaviour from children because they had grown used to it over several years.

YCS leaders referred to issues with the YOI population, such as the high concentration of violent offenders, and the high proportion of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which often affects their behaviour in lessons. They recognised that teachers were sometimes fearful of the levels of violence in education classes.

Inspection evidence showed that poor behaviour has become more prevalent. Leaders agreed that some teachers were not well trained for coping with behavioural difficulties. YCS leaders hope to work with children's parents, where possible, to help restore positive parental relationships and better support children to behave well. It is too early to identify any signs of progress with such measures.

The failure of education leaders and managers to recruit sufficient teaching staff has led to narrow, fragmented and tumultuous curriculums

The breadth and depth of the curriculums that education providers offer have declined over the last decade. This is due largely to providers' inability to recruit and retain sufficient specialist teaching staff.

Because they have too few teachers, leaders and managers cancel many planned courses. In some recent inspections, inspectors found that up to half of the vocational training workshops were closed because there were not enough staff. Mathematics and English classes are too often covered by non-specialist teachers, or else the number of hours offered to children is greatly reduced. Children who already have GCSEs get very few opportunities to study at higher levels because there are not enough specialist staff with the relevant expertise to teach them.

Children rightly express frustration at these issues. They feel disappointed that they cannot study the mathematics and English qualifications they need to improve their lives. Children also become despondent and demotivated when courses get cancelled part way into their studies because staff leave and there is no replacement.

When leaders and managers make improvements to the curriculum, these too often tend to be fragile and unsustainable. For example, inspectors comment positively on the broadening of the curriculum at one inspection, only to find that by the next inspection the curriculum has been reduced again. Only in a small number of cases have managers developed and sustained broad, relevant curriculums.

When challenged about the lack of suitable teaching staff for many subjects, education providers pointed out the recruitment problems that exist across the further education and skills sector, problems that are further exacerbated in YOIs because of the more challenging teaching environment.

Leaders and managers from YOIs and education providers have not worked together well enough to prevent a decline in the quality of education at the 4 YOIs

Most senior leaders at YOIs say that the education provider's performance is not strong enough. However, inspectors find that YOI leaders do not understand curriculum design or implementation well enough to be able to challenge education leaders about poor performance, or to set actions for improvement. For example, YOI leaders and managers' knowledge of the progress that children make because of their studies is too limited, and they do not understand the weaknesses in the educational provision precisely enough.

The relationship between YOI leaders and education leaders is too often strained. Although YOI leaders are critical of shortcomings in education departments, they generally do not collaborate with education providers effectively to improve the situation. On other occasions, the relationship is too close. Some senior YOI leaders do not think that they need to hold the education provider to account, despite a decline in performance.

Leaders and managers plan forums such as quality improvement groups (QIGs) to scrutinise education provision. However, they do not use these groups well enough to swiftly improve education. In some cases, the groups meet infrequently, or in other cases, senior representatives from the YOI and education provider do not routinely attend meetings. When QIGs are running, agendas focus heavily on the operational aspects of activity, rather than on analysing and measuring the impact of the education provision or assessing the progress children make.

One problem that prevents senior leaders from providing rigorous oversight of the quality of education is the considerable turnover of YOI governing governors, particularly in the last 5 years. Since the start of 2019, there have been 6 different main governors at Werrington, 5 at Cookham Wood and 3 at Wetherby (with another change in governor set to take place in 2024).

The judgement of education leaders and managers about the quality of provision is, at times, inaccurate. In a significant number of cases, they are overly generous in their assessment of the quality of education. Some managers tell inspectors that they are pleased with the good quality of teaching, but inspectors find that teaching is generally of a poor quality.

Education leaders and managers often describe to inspectors extensive quality assurance procedures, and staff development opportunities. However, these have not led to significant improvements in teaching, or led to a good quality of education in any YOI. Inspectors have found processes that are not rigorous enough. For example, during lesson visits observers focus too much on describing teaching activities rather than on the impact of the curriculum, and do not set meaningful targets to help teachers improve when they find weaknesses.

Some senior leaders from YOIs and education providers lack ambition for children. Actions from YOI and education leaders to bring about improvements take too long to implement. A culture appears to have settled whereby a 'requires improvement' grade at inspection is considered acceptable by senior leaders and does not merit rapid actions for improvement.

Education providers recognised that there were numerous challenges in terms of how they worked with leaders of YOIs. They felt that governors did not understand the accountability they held for the contract: governors, from the education providers' perspective, saw this accountability as resting solely with the education provider.

Providers also voiced disquiet about YOI leaders' lack of knowledge about education more generally. This had led to sometimes unhelpful criticisms being made of teachers, and feedback that was not useful when providers were trying to make necessary improvements.

Education providers expressed hope that newly appointed heads of education, skills and work (HoESWs), who have educational backgrounds, would bridge the gap between education and YOI leaders.

Leaders from the YCS acknowledged that there have been considerable historical

issues in terms of YOI leaders' and managers' educational expertise, and their ability to support and challenge education providers effectively. They described a range of work that they had carried out recently to improve this. For example, they had introduced training for YOI governors and new specialist roles (such as HoESWs) and were getting more involved in senior-level meetings.

YCS leaders felt that the core YCS team was more focused and knowledgeable than previously and was taking positive steps forward. However, they recognised that there was still much to do to improve the quality of education at YOIs.

Leaders do not have an effective strategy to tackle longstanding attendance problems; for the past 10 years, children's attendance at education has often been too low

No single YOI has had consistently high rates of attendance over the last decade. At many recent inspections, children's attendance has been low. Any improvement in attendance rates tends to be fragile. Inspectors have found numerous examples of attendance improving from poor levels to good levels, but then declining again at the subsequent inspection.

In too many cases, leaders do not have an effective strategy to deal with poor attendance. Leaders frequently identify poor attendance as a weakness in self-assessment reports, but do not set meaningful actions to improve it. They also fail to analyse the reasons for poor attendance. Inspectors also identify a lack of encouragement/incentive to help poor attenders to improve their attendance, and a lack of consistently applied sanctions when children refuse to attend.

In a few cases, children's attendance has been generally good. In these cases, leaders' attendance strategies are more effective. For example, leaders and managers focus closely on the reasons for non-attendance and encourage children to re-engage in their studies. Senior leaders prioritise children's attendance at education within the regime of the YOI.

There has been a lack of investment in the infrastructure that children need for a good education, in particular investment in ICT equipment

Classroom and training workshop infrastructure is not good enough. In the worst cases, inspectors have found classrooms that are oppressive and dirty, with offensive graffiti on the walls. Too many classrooms also lack basic resources, such as whiteboards or even enough chairs. In some cases, classrooms had recently been redecorated and provided a more welcoming and conducive study environment.

Although many vocational workshops contain appropriate resources, in a

significant minority of cases children do not have access to the right equipment. The upgrades that managers buy are not always installed quickly enough. For example, inspectors saw one case where children studying on a barista course had no access to a working coffee machine, and one where children on a catering course had to use domestic rather than industrial cookers.

In the large majority of cases, children have not had access to up-to-date information and communications technology (ICT) equipment. This makes it difficult for teachers to run modern ICT curriculums, and for children to gain the necessary contemporary digital skills. There are early signs of improvement in this area: at very recent inspections, inspectors have found that more children have access to modern ICT equipment, such as laptops, to support their studies.

In the majority of inspections over the past decade, inspectors have found that the Virtual Campus (prisoner access to community education, training and employment opportunities through the internet) is either not operational or is severely underused. This makes it difficult for children to research further study and job opportunities when they are close to release.

Leaders from the YCS pointed out recent and considerable investments to improve infrastructure. These include upgrades to make education classrooms and workshops better study environments. The investments also include improvements to ICT infrastructure, such as cabling to enhance access to the Virtual Campus, and access to laptops for children in their rooms, so that they can access educational materials and library books. Leaders commented that these investments had great potential to improve children's education at YOIs. However, delays to the implementation of projects mean that, so far, positive results were yet to be widely felt.

Children's opportunities to access work or educational placements through release on temporary licence have decreased significantly

Some children in custody are eligible to study or work outside the YOI through release on temporary licence (RoTL). This is based on the YOI's assessment of their risk to the public. These children can attend a college course or work placement during the day, and then return to the YOI at the end of lessons or the working day.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, inspectors found substantial numbers of RoTL placements taking place. In the post-pandemic years, inspectors have found a few YOIs where opportunities for RoTL have improved. In these cases, children have attended college interviews, or carried out meaningful voluntary work in the community. More commonly, however, inspectors have found very few or no such activities. Sometimes, leaders have recognised this as a weakness and told inspectors that they plan to reintroduce RoTL imminently. However, by the next inspection, inspectors find that there has been little or no progress.

Links to employers can help children close to release to find work and understand

employers' expectations of them in the workplace. In too many cases, these links have become limited. Some leaders and managers blame the pandemic for this.

Where leaders have successfully reintroduced links to employers, these include job search events held inside YOIs, and opportunities for children to attend job interviews or gain employment on release. Children value these links, which help them to understand the modern world of employment.

Leaders' and managers' strategies to support children to improve their reading ability are under-developed

Ofsted's 'Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons' was published in March 2022. It found 'systemic barriers that prevent prisoners from receiving effective support to acquire or improve their reading skills' and curriculums that were 'not focused on teaching prisoners to read or developing their reading and literacy skills'. The prisoners with the greatest need generally received the least support. [\[footnote 11\]](#) Ofsted made recommendations for improvement to prison governors – including governors of YOIs – and the wider HM Prison and Probation Service.

Inspections have since taken place at all 4 YOIs; in each one, inspectors have found that progress in developing an effective reading strategy has been limited. The most recent full Ofsted inspection took place almost 2 years after the publication of the previous report, but inspectors nevertheless found that managers still did not understand children's needs for reading support. Only a few children benefited from support to develop their reading skills. Children who do not benefit from high-quality reading education are less likely to access further learning and develop independence and confidence in adult life.

Other typical shortcomings include teachers not being trained in phonics, and limited assessment of children's reading abilities being carried out. In the best cases, literacy specialists had developed meaningful strategies, including appropriate reading assessment tools. However, these actions were yet to have much impact.

Ofsted's findings on systemic failings related to the quality of education

Too few teachers focus closely enough on children's starting points when planning and teaching their curriculums

This particular weakness largely – but not exclusively – relates to mathematics, English, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and ICT curriculums.

Children in custody have a variety of starting points in these subjects, and teachers are often aware of this. However, teachers do not often focus closely enough on information they receive about starting points when they plan curriculums. They have not, for example, used the results of initial assessments carried out at the YOI well enough.

This means that, in too many cases, the work children complete in class does not match their individual gaps in knowledge closely enough. Children with differing ability levels complete the same activities in class. For example, inspectors have seen English lessons where teachers have given GCSE-standard texts to children who cannot yet read securely, because this level suits some of their more advanced classmates.

Conversely, inspectors have also found children in English lessons being set word searches and colouring activities by teachers, even though they already have a GCSE-level qualification in the subject. In either case, children quickly lose interest and become disruptive, because the work set does not match their needs.

Too few teachers focus their curriculums closely enough on the knowledge, skills and behaviours that children most need to learn

In too many cases, over time, teachers and trainers have based their curriculums on tasks or units that they want children to complete, rather than on developing the knowledge and skills that children need for their future career and study plans on release.

Such curriculums are too narrow and lack ambition. Too little meaningful work takes place in lessons. These lessons are disjointed, and often based on completing worksheets and workbooks. Teachers move children from one activity to another without connecting, explaining or demonstrating new concepts in enough depth. They do not check well enough that children have the fundamental knowledge they need before they approach more challenging topics. As a result, children too often demonstrate only a limited knowledge of the topics that they have been taught.

For example, in a mathematics class visited during an inspection at a YOI, children were set a worksheet that required them to use a calculator. However, the teacher had not taught them how to use the calculator to complete the necessary operations. As a result, children struggled and lost interest in the task.

The curriculums in vocational training subjects have, over time, tended to be better organised. Training is often planned to introduce students to new skills and knowledge gradually and then allow them to practise it. For example, inspectors have seen catering courses that include well-planned recap activities, to ensure that children remember important knowledge about food safety in the long term.

These trainers use good-quality demonstrations to introduce new concepts, and link theoretical concepts to commercially realistic scenarios. They use questioning well to challenge children to think more deeply. As a result, children can use specialist equipment confidently to produce a high standard of work. For example, they use spray guns on painting and decorating courses.

However, on a minority of weaker vocational courses, trainers have based curriculums on ticking off competencies that children demonstrate. They do not make sure that children remember long term the new knowledge and skills that they have gained. Children sometimes complete vocational qualifications well before their course end date, but trainers do not give them additional, more challenging training to extend their knowledge and skills.

When asked about the poor quality of curriculum planning and teaching found by inspectors, education leaders pointed to teachers' frustrations with fragmented and unpredictable YOI regimes. In their view, high numbers of lesson cancellations and children arriving very late to class meant that teachers focused more on getting children through exams, because there was far less teaching time available than originally planned.

Unpredictable regimes also make it difficult to plan teacher development activities. For example, managers planned developmental observations of teaching, but could often not complete these because lessons were cancelled, or children arrived too late to allow a meaningful lesson to take place.

Education providers also felt that, on the many occasions when children had been locked in their rooms for significant periods of time before their lessons, teachers needed to concentrate on helping the children to regulate their behaviour before they could teach the curriculum. Again, this reduced the time available to cover new topics.

Teachers do not use assessment well enough to check that children's knowledge is secure

In too many instances in more recent inspections, inspectors have found that teachers and trainers do not check children's knowledge thoroughly enough. For example, when they assess children's progress through whole-class question and answer activities, teachers do not give children enough time to think. Instead, they answer many of the questions themselves.

This has declined from the more positive picture we found in the earlier inspections in the 10-year period covered in this review. At those inspections, teachers and trainers used probing questions and other assessment activities well to check what children had learned, and to understand where they could improve. Teachers and trainers then used this information to adjust their subsequent teaching. For example, when they found that children struggled with certain topics, they returned to cover these again in subsequent lessons. Such good practice is rarely evident in

more recent inspections.

Children do not receive useful written feedback often enough from teachers, and the quality of this has declined over time

At earlier inspections where the quality of education was judged to be good, teachers' and trainers' feedback was clear, constructive and supportive. However, more recently, inspectors have found that written feedback is too often ineffective in helping children to improve their work.

This is because too many teachers do not use feedback to help children understand their errors and know what they need to do to improve. In most cases, feedback is overly positive, and does not identify areas for improvement. Inspectors have also found examples of inaccurate or careless marking, with clearly incorrect or wholly inappropriate answers being marked as correct.

Other teachers mark work accurately and provide feedback on what needs to improve. However, in too many cases, teachers fail to ensure that children use this feedback to return to their work and make corrections, and/or add more detail. It is key that learners understand from feedback what they need to do to improve, how to do this, and that they have the time to make necessary improvements.

Staff support for children with SEND has declined over time; this decline started before the COVID-19 pandemic

In earlier inspections covered by this report, staff used induction activities well to identify children's SEND, and the support that those children needed. They communicated these needs well, including to wing staff, and teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs) were responsive to children's needs. However, a trend of decline began in the years immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In almost all cases, SEND specialists have continued to be tenacious and diligent in their work. They get relevant information on children's SEND from their previous schools/local authorities and produce up-to-date support plans that include strategies for teachers and LSAs to use. They also work with external specialists to provide additional support to children.

The main problem is that too many teaching and support staff fail to make effective use of the information they have about children's SEND. They sometimes also lack any training to support children with SEND. During lessons, these teachers do not make suitable adjustments to their teaching and teaching resources to support children with SEND. The effectiveness of LSA support for children with SEND is patchy. This is in part because of staff vacancies, and in part because LSAs in post do not understand the children's needs well enough.

When asked about the decline in the quality of support for children with SEND, education providers recognised that there were cultural issues that they needed to work on. For example they commented that, in some cases, teachers were too comfortable working as they did, and did not want to develop new skills and knowledge to help them better support children with SEND.

Education providers also noted the impact of staffing shortages in education departments and in the wider YOI. High staff turnover made it harder to train their own staff, and to train officers so that they also have a better understanding of SEND.

Education providers offer limited on-wing outreach support, and YOI staff have not supported this well

Education staff teach children who cannot attend education classes, for example because of their poor behaviour or specific vulnerabilities, through on-wing outreach sessions. The aim is usually to reintegrate the children swiftly into mainstream education courses.

The quality of outreach support has not been consistently good enough. In too many cases, staff offering outreach support are not subject specialists. They do not plan their curriculums well or use high-quality resources. The goal is often to simply keep children busy for a short time. Sessions do not take place routinely, in part because of staff shortages. This approach does not help children to develop sufficient beneficial new knowledge, skills and behaviours.

In the significant minority of cases where outreach support is better, outreach teachers plan their curriculums well. They focus closely on children's specific needs. They recognise that, for most, outreach support is only a short-term solution. This means that they focus closely on reintegrating children into education classes.

In many cases, YOI staff do not help education staff to run effective outreach sessions. Leaders, managers and wing staff do not give enough priority to outreach support, and they sometimes do not understand the purpose of outreach teaching.

In too many cases, children have been unlocked by officers very late for outreach sessions, or sessions have been curtailed or cancelled because of the needs of the regime. In addition, the resources made available by YOI staff are too limited; for example, there is a lack of quiet locations for study. As a result, too many outreach lessons take place in general association areas that are not conducive to learning.

Leaders and managers do not make sure that work activities are used

well to develop children's skills and knowledge, or work-readiness

For those aged 18 and over, YOIs should make work opportunities available as part of their curriculum. These enable those of working age to develop skills and knowledge directly related to specific industries, as well as general skills to prepare them for work. Those under 18 can also carry out some work-related activities to help them develop behaviours related to employment.

However, the work activities that leaders and managers provide have often been very limited. The activities do not include opportunities for children in training to gain new knowledge and skills. Too often, work has been used to keep occupied those children who are too vulnerable to attend mainstream education.

The job roles that children can undertake are mundane, such as litter picking. When there are opportunities to develop new skills, such as in cleaning or laundry jobs, YOI instructors do not plan enough training. They give children only the most basic training and equipment so that they can carry out their tasks. They do not, for example, use these roles to help children develop general skills for employment.

There are, however, a few examples of staff using job roles well to provide ambitious opportunities for children. In these cases, children have to apply for roles, and have job interviews. Once appointed, they undertake well-planned and demanding work. For example, inspectors have found children in catering roles that include opportunities to develop new skills in customer-facing roles and take on supervisory responsibilities.

Increasing numbers of children over the last decade have left their courses before they take their final examinations

In the worst cases that inspectors have seen recently, close to three quarters of children leave courses before they take their final examinations.

This is particularly the case on functional mathematics, functional English, ESOL and ICT courses. Inspectors have also found cases where children have been working in environments that require basic safety qualifications, such as food hygiene qualifications in kitchen environments, but have left these courses without completing them.

Some children are released from custody or transfer to the adult estate before they can take their final examinations. However, in too many cases, poor curriculum planning and/or teacher resignations have led to children being unable to – or deciding not to – complete their courses.

In most cases, when children do complete their courses, they pass their final examinations.

HMIP's findings: a deterioration in the provision of purposeful activity and time out of cell at YOIs

HMIP expects that children are able, and expected, to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them. Children should spend most of their time out of their cell, engaged in activities such as education, leisure and cultural pursuits, 7 days a week.

A declining trend in the quality of purposeful activity

Since 2014, the amount of time out of cell for children and provision of purposeful activity have deteriorated considerably across the 4 YOIs in England. In 2014, purposeful activity was judged to be reasonably good in almost all cases: only Feltham A was found not to have sufficiently good outcomes.

Increased segregation, reduced time out of cell

The current picture is entirely different. In 2023/24, outcomes for children in purposeful activity were not good enough at all 4 sites. They were judged to be poor at 3 of the 4 sites. The decline was starkest at Cookham Wood. In 2022, HMIP's Chief Inspector issued this YOI an urgent notification, because staff's inability to deal with conflict between children meant that the YOI relied on keeping children apart from each other to maintain safety.[\[footnote 12\]](#)

The impact of this was that children were allocated to education classes based on who they could safely mix with, rather than their abilities or needs. The situation had become so extreme that over a quarter of the population was completely segregated. Most of these children were locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day with no meaningful human interaction, in conditions that amounted to solitary confinement.

In the past 10 years, HMIP has made 85 recommendations or concerns about time out of cell. The progress that leaders have made to deal with our concerns has been poor. When HMIP inspectors followed up these recommendations and concerns at subsequent inspections, they found that less than a quarter (22%) had been achieved.

The average time a child spends out of their cell has also reduced over time. This includes time in education, social time, including time outside, and physical activity in the gym. In a survey of children held at the time of inspection in 2023/24, just over a quarter (27%) of children reported receiving less than 2 hours out of their cell on a weekday. This rose to a concerning 59% at the weekend.

At Wetherby, in 2017, time out of cell for children exceeded HMIP's expectation of 10 daily hours for some children. But, by 2023, a typical child had 3 to 5 hours out of their cells on a weekday.

At Cookham Wood, in 2023, 41% of children were locked up during the school day. Children who could get to education spent 3 hours and 45 minutes out of their cells per day during the week. Those who were not in education got considerably less. This compared poorly to 2014, when only 9% of children were locked in their cells during the core day, and children averaged around 9 hours out of cell on a weekday and 7 at weekends.

Werrington was the only other YOI to achieve HMIP's expectation of 10 daily hours out of cell (2018), but this has reduced considerably in recent years to an average of 4 hours on weekdays and 3 hours at weekends.

Reasons for the reduction in time out of cell

There are several reasons for the decline, which was greatly exacerbated by the response to the pandemic. These reasons were similar in each YOI. Staffing has been a constant concern, especially in the 2 YOIs located in the south of England. Feltham and Cookham Wood have found it difficult to retain staff, and both sites have had high levels of staff turnover. All YOIs have experienced high levels of staff sickness. This has hampered leaders' ability to run consistent regimes and has led to children being locked up more.

The underlying reason for the decline in the amount of time children spend out of their cells has been the ineffectiveness of behaviour management schemes. In 2022/23 only 37% of children held in English YOIs reported that the incentives on offer encouraged them to behave well. Both incentives and sanctions are not consistently delivered across all sites.

The arrival of the COVID pandemic and national restrictions in 2020 exacerbated the situation. The YCS took steps to reduce the amount of contact between children at every YOI, which led to smaller groups being unlocked for shorter periods of time to ensure children had access to basics, such as showers, and time outside.

Children did not mix with other children outside of their group at all. While this reduced levels of violence in the short term, it created conflict between the groups. Children with little else to do while locked in their cell shouted abuse, or antagonised other groups.

When the restrictions were lifted, leaders found it hard to transition back to more open regimes. The number of 'keep-aparts' spiralled. At Werrington in 2023, for example, inspectors found that staff were managing 388 non-associations or 'keep-aparts' in a population of 89 children.[\[footnote 13\]](#)

This effectively meant that staff had to ensure that a child did not come into

contact with 3 or 4 other specified children on any move around the YOI, which was a significant challenge. Similar issues led to the collapse of any kind of effective regime at Cookham Wood in 2023. Inspectors reported that ‘there seemed to be no imagination, creativity, or plan for how to promote good behaviour, with ineffective incentives on offer.’[\[footnote 14\]](#)

Worsening relationships between children and staff, and increasing conflict

These ‘keep-aparts’ have an impact on every element of a child’s life while in custody. They also affect staff and the time they have available to spend with children, and to develop the meaningful relationships that are the foundation of effective behaviour management.

At Feltham A in 2017, the quality of relationships between staff of all disciplines and children was generally very good. This contrasted greatly with HMIP’s findings just 2 years later in January 2019, when only 51% of children said most staff treated them with respect, against the comparator of 70%. Only 34% said they felt cared for by most staff, and nearly half the population said they had no member of staff they could turn to for help.[\[footnote 15\]](#)

YOIs have become characterised by a vicious cycle of high levels of conflict, resulting in complicated ‘keep-apart’ lists, which in turn reduce time out of cell for all children.

This often leads to more conflict, as children with little else to do antagonise other groups by disrupting the daily routine or shouting abuse at their counterparts. Until this cycle is broken, it is hard to see how the decline in time out of cell, and access to education, skills and work, can be addressed.

When discussing this topic with Ofsted, education providers also spoke negatively about the over-use of ‘keep-aparts’ as a way of managing behaviour. They felt that, rather than being so risk-averse, YOI leaders should instead focus staff on engaging with children on ‘keep-apart’ lists.

Recommendations for YCS leaders, managers, staff and education providers

- Significantly reduce the amount of time that children are kept in isolation or locked up in the absence of an effective behaviour management strategy.
- Focus leadership efforts on resolving conflict between children wherever possible, to reduce the number of children kept apart from others for safety reasons.

Implement appropriate management strategies to help children improve their behaviour and attitudes and provide teachers with up-to-date training to help them manage challenging behaviour.

- Prioritise children's and young people's attendance at education, so that they access a comprehensive and purposeful day of educational activity, training opportunities and work that best meet their needs and career goals.
- Improve the curriculum so that it supports children to develop employability skills and behaviours; and strengthen links with employers to help children develop valuable vocational skills.
- Help children who cannot attend education, in particular those with SEND, to make as much progress as their peers.
- Improve reading strategies in YOIs to ensure that all children significantly improve their reading skills.
- Improve the quality of education by:
 - using children's starting points to inform the planning of learning and the curriculum
 - focusing on teaching the knowledge, skills and behaviours that children need to learn to be successful in their next steps
 - using assessment effectively to check what children have learned and to better support their progress
 - ensuring that children complete their learning goals and, where appropriate, attain qualifications.
- Recruit appropriately qualified and competent teaching staff, so that the children are taught by experienced and competent teachers who know how to support them to make good progress.
- Provide high-quality classroom accommodation, learning resources and digital technologies to support teaching and learning.
- Ensure better collaboration between YOI leaders and education providers to help them jointly offer children a high-quality learning experience.
- Review the length of time that governors stay at a YOI. The YCS should consider extending their time in post to offer continuity to the YOIs while they are improving.

Methodology

Staff from Ofsted and HMIP worked jointly on this review.

Ofsted reviewed inspection/IRP evidence bases and reports, including published and draft reports, for all inspection activities that took place between June 2014 and March 2024. HMIP reviewed inspection reports for the same period and evidence bases for inspections from 2018 onwards. This enabled those working on the report to identify:

- systemic and longstanding weaknesses in the education provision at the 4 YOIs

- where and how quality of provision has declined over time at the 4 YOIs
- instances of better-quality provision, and any improvements being made

Ofsted also discussed the preliminary key themes of the report with senior leaders from the YCS and the 3 education providers who teach at YOIs, so that they could provide their perspective. The 3 education providers are:

- Novus
- People Plus
- Shaw Trust

Annex A

Table showing full inspection grades, 2014 to 2024

Ofsted’s overall effectiveness grades for learning, skills and work, and HMIP’s healthy prison test outcomes for purposeful activity:

Year	Cookham Wood	Feltham A	Werrington	Wetherby and Keppel Unit
2014	Ofsted: good [footnote 16] HMIP: reasonably good	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Not applicable
2015	Ofsted: good [footnote 17] HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Ofsted: good [footnote 18] HMIP: good/reasonably good [footnote 19]
2016	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Not applicable	Not applicable	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor

2017	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good
2018	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good
2019	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good
2019	Not applicable	Ofsted: inadequate [footnote 20] HMIP: poor	Not applicable	Not applicable
2020 [footnote 21]	Not applicable	Not applicable	Ofsted: good HMIP: reasonably good	Not applicable
2021 [footnote 22]	Ofsted: insufficient progress HMIP: poor	Not applicable	Not applicable	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good
2022	Not applicable	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor	Not applicable

2023	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor	Not applicable	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor	Ofsted: requires improvement HMIP: not sufficiently good
2024	Not applicable	Ofsted: inadequate HMIP: poor	Not applicable	Not applicable

1. In March 2024, the Ministry of Justice announced that His Majesty’s Young Offender Institution (HMYOI) Cookham Wood was to be repurposed as an adult prison. Its population was to be moved to other sites in the youth estate, including a new secure school. See [‘Young offender’s institution to be repurposed’ Ministry of Justice, 21 March 2024](#). ↩
2. The Keppel Unit is a specialist facility located within the perimeter fence of HMYOI Wetherby. It houses children with the most complex needs. ↩
3. The operational capacity figure is the total number of children that a YOI can hold. ↩
4. This figure included 3 female young offenders. ↩
5. [R Little, ‘Putting education at the heart of custody? The views of children on education in a young offender institution’](#), in ‘British Journal of Community Justice’, 2015, Volume 13(2), pages 27 to 46. ↩
6. [‘Post-note: education in youth custody’](#), Houses of Parliament, 2016, Number 524, page 3. ↩
7. Data provided by Youth Custody Service, November 2023. ↩
8. [‘Prisons in England and Wales – find information on prisons and young offender institutions in England and Wales’](#), HM Prison and Probation Service and Ministry of Justice, May 2020. ↩
9. [‘Children in custody 2022–23: An analysis of 12–18-year-olds’ perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offender institutions’](#), HM Inspectorate of Prisons, November 2023, pages 7 and 17. ↩
10. “Keep-aparts” refers to certain children who are separated from others in broader YOI activities such as education, to avoid the risk of conflict. ↩
11. [‘Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons’](#), Ofsted, March 2022 ↩
12. A process that allows His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons to directly alert the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice if he has an urgent and significant concern about the performance of a prison/YOI. ↩
13. [‘Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Werrington, 31 July–11 August 2023’](#), HMIP, page 20. ↩
- 14.

[‘Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Cookham Wood, 4–20 April 2023’, HMIP, page 3.](#) ↩

15. [‘Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Feltham A Children’s Unit 14-24 January 2019’, HMIP, page 27.](#) ↩
16. Leadership and management graded requires improvement. ↩
17. Leadership and management graded requires improvement. ↩
18. Ofsted inspected Wetherby and Keppel Unit separately up to and including 2015. In 2015, Ofsted graded both as ‘good’ at their individual inspections. ↩
19. HMIP graded Wetherby and Keppel Unit separately up to and including the 2021 inspection. At all but one inspection, the grades were identical for purposeful activity, so they are not written twice in this table. The only exception to this was in 2015, when HMIP judged Wetherby to be reasonably good and Keppel to be good. ↩
20. Feltham A was inspected in both January and July 2019. ↩
21. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ofsted’s inspection activity was limited. No full prison/YOI Ofsted inspections took place between the initial lockdown in March 2020 and October 2021. ↩
22. As Ofsted returned to inspection activity in 2021, inspectors gave prisons/YOIs a progress judgement as they moved towards reinstating a full curriculum. ↩

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