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Guidance

Inspection information: education, skills training and work in prisons and young offender institutions

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Applies to England

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 **For use on inspections from 21 September 2026.**

About this page

This page contains information about our inspections of prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs).

It does not explain how inspectors carry out full inspections, which is in our separate [operating guide for prison and YOI inspections](#). The operating guide sets out what inspectors do on inspection, who we engage with and how, and how we feed back to leaders and report our findings. This page also does not contain the standards that inspectors use to evaluate provision. Those standards, with guidance on applying them across different establishment types, are in our [toolkit for prisons and YOIs](#). These documents should be read together.

Types of inspection

We normally inspect education, skills and work in prisons and YOIs as part of the inspections led by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP). These include both full inspections and monitoring inspections.

On full inspections, we give the establishment a grade for each of the 5 evaluation

areas. For further information on how we carry out full inspections, please see our [operating guide for prison and YOI inspections](#). Our findings and the grades we have given are included in the full HMIP report.

We may also carry out separate inspections of education, skills and work in prisons. This might be to ensure that there is a timely follow-up full inspection or monitoring inspection, for example when the inspection of a prison's education, skills and work has raised concerns. These standalone inspections will result in a separate published report on the Ofsted reports website.

Monitoring inspections are an interim form of inspection that explores one or more specific themes. Their purpose is to monitor the establishment's progress against these themes to encourage improvement and assess risk. The areas of focus normally relate to the concerns inspectors reported at the last full inspection, although they may also relate to matters that have arisen since then.

Monitoring inspections usually take place as part of HMIP's independent reviews of progress (IRPs). Our findings and progress judgements will be included in the IRP report. When HMIP announces an IRP, the notification letter will set out our involvement and the aspects we will focus on.

We may also carry out a standalone monitoring inspection of a prison's education, skills and work. This will normally result in a published report that sets out the findings and progress judgements.

Types of establishments we inspect

As part of joint inspections led by HMIP, we inspect education, skills and work at the following types of establishments:

- prisons
- YOIs

Scope of inspection

All education, skills and work activities that a prison or YOI offers fall within the scope

of the inspection. This includes any contracted prison education provision, such as the prison education service (PES)/prison education framework (PEF) or dynamic purchasing system provision run for or on behalf of the prison, and any provision run under a subcontract.

As part of the inspection, we may inspect any education, training or work carried out on behalf of the prison or YOI through contractual arrangements (including by subcontract or partnership arrangements).

Ofsted inspectors do not report specifically on the library and physical education. These are now in the 'Time out of cell' section in the HMIP report (purposeful activity). Ofsted inspectors will, however, visit the library and/or gym if there are specific learning activities taking place at these locations, and may report on these. This includes reporting on prisoners' learning, achievements and progress as a result of these activities.

HMIP's Expectations

HMIP leads the inspection of prisons using its inspection framework, known as '[Expectations](#)'. There are separate expectations for men's prisons (including YOIs holding young men aged 18 to 21), women's prisons and children in custody. The criteria in 'Expectations' that are relevant to the inspection of education, skills and work activities in prisons and YOIs are considered by inspectors during inspection.

Contracted education and skills provision

We include the provision delivered by the main education and skills contractor (where there is a separate contractor) in our key findings. We do not give a separate grade for the contractor; instead, we include our findings in sections of the report such as 'Curriculum', 'Teaching and training', and 'Achievement'. Inspectors will make specific reference to the PES/PEF contractor or other main contractor in these sections.

When we inspect establishments

Because we normally inspect education, skills and work as part of HMIP inspections of prisons and YOIs, the time frames for inspections depend on HMIP.

We will normally carry out monitoring visits in parallel with HMIP's IRPs. This means that HMIP also sets the timeframes for this inspection activity.

Length of inspection

Full inspections normally last up to 4 days on site. Monitoring visits normally last up to 3 days on site.

The inspection team

Inspections are carried out by:

- His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), who we employ directly
- Ofsted Inspectors (OI), who are contracted to work for us part time; they are either serving practitioners with direct experience of working with prisons/YOIs, or former HMI with experience of inspecting these establishments

The size of the inspection team depends on:

- the type of inspection
- the size and nature of the establishment

A lead inspector from Ofsted oversees the Ofsted aspects of the inspection. They are responsible for managing the inspection process and the inspection team, making the notification and planning calls to the establishment and writing the report.

Team inspectors support the lead inspector. They may be present for the whole of the inspection or only on some days. Individual team inspectors may lead on one or

more evaluation areas.

Sometimes new inspectors, members of Ofsted's non-inspection staff or other professionals may be present on site to observe an inspection. An HMI or senior HMI may also visit an establishment, or monitor an inspection remotely, to make sure the inspection meets our quality assurance and consistency standards. We will notify leaders during the notification (if a standalone inspection) or planning calls if there will be additional people with the inspection team.

Conduct

Throughout the inspection, we expect establishments and inspectors to act in line with our [code of conduct](#) and show professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect at all times.

Information about the inspection process

Overall inspection focus

Our renewed inspections reflect a significant shift in inspection culture. There is a stronger emphasis on leadership as a driver of sustained improvement and on inclusion. These are reflected both in the themes guiding our evidence-gathering and in the standards within the toolkit.

Inspections are grounded in respectful professional dialogue, focused on impact and designed to support self-improvement and inclusive practice. They are structured but also flexible, adapting to context, responding to evidence and concentrating on what matters most for prisoners. Learning walks are an important part of inspection. They allow leaders to share with inspectors the context of their establishment, and to showcase aspects of their work of which they are particularly proud.

Inspectors work with the establishment's staff to build an accurate view of the quality of the provision. This includes knowing and understanding how well prisoners:

- engage – with the education, skills and work offer
- achieve – academically and personally
- thrive – benefit from the right systems, processes and levels of oversight, so that they can flourish and/or fulfil their potential, whatever their background or individual needs

Inspectors will consider what leaders and managers are aiming to achieve, how well they are doing it and how they know it is working. Their starting point is the ‘expected standard’ in each of the evaluation areas in the toolkit. These considerations underpin planning, shape evidence-gathering and guide our evaluation from preparation through to final reporting.

The foundations of our renewed inspections are:

- prisoners first – high expectations with a focus on outcomes and experiences
- the care and wellbeing of those we inspect – through collaborative working with establishments and building positive relationships with leaders and staff
- an establishment’s unique context – evidence is evaluated in the light of each establishment’s strengths, challenges and priorities for improvement, and how well it identifies and meets the needs of different groups of prisoners
- the lens of the toolkit – the toolkit sets out the grading standards, supporting shared professional dialogue
- quality and impact – evidence-based decisions focus on the quality and the impact of leaders’ choices and actions on prisoners, reflected in the grading standards

Throughout the inspection, we give particular attention to the experiences and outcomes of those who face barriers to learning, work and/or wellbeing; those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), including needs related to neurodiversity; and those who have other support needs. These groups are central to planning, inspection activity and evaluation. Inspectors will engage with leaders who have responsibility for SEND and, where relevant, those responsible for supporting looked-after children. Inspectors will also consider engaging with other relevant leaders who have an inclusion role supporting prisoners with barriers to education, skills and work, as appropriate.

What happens when an establishment is notified of

an inspection

When an establishment receives notification of an inspection, leaders should ensure that those responsible for governance of the prison, establishment managers, staff, prisoners, subcontractors, employers and other stakeholders are aware of it.

Ahead of the planning calls, the lead inspector will also give the establishment an opportunity to let us know whether anyone who will be joining the planning calls requires any reasonable adjustments due to a disability. They may also consider making other adaptations to the inspection process if those with protected characteristics are likely to be put at a disadvantage.

We do not want establishments to do any additional work or to ask prisoners or employers to do work specifically for the inspection. We do not want inspections to create unnecessary workload for managers, teachers, trainers, instructors or other staff. Importantly, leaders do not need to provide:

- any information beyond what we ask for
- information in any specific format (if the current format is easily accessible for inspectors)

Which leaders can attend the notification, follow-up and planning calls

During the notification call (for a standalone inspection) or the follow-up email (when notification is made by HMIP), the lead inspector and the establishment agree who will attend the planning calls. We encourage establishments to have more than one senior leader in all calls to provide mutual assistance and support. This will usually include [the nominee](#), where applicable. A leader from contracted provision, such as the education provider, can be included in the planning calls.

Inspectors will ask the establishment not to record these calls or any further calls.

Information the lead inspector may ask for during notification or planning calls

As soon as the establishment has been notified of the inspection, staff should draw

together the information/documents listed below. These should be working documents and not prepared specifically for the inspection.

The information will ensure that the lead inspector clearly understands the scope and range of the provision and has what they need to plan the logistics of the inspection.

The nominee should email the following information, as applicable, to the lead inspector during the planning stage:

- the completed Ofsted information annex (on a standalone inspection, Ofsted will request a similar set of information directly)
- the establishment's population statistics, including age, ethnicity, length of sentence, length of stay and whether any barriers to education, skills and work have been identified (such as SEND, low-level reading ability or other support needs)
- timetables for lessons/sessions/workshops or other learning and work activities during the week
- the establishment's current self-assessment report or equivalent evaluation report and quality-improvement plans
- verified achievement data (for example from prison management information systems), and performance data on prisoners' progression to further courses and/or into work

Email the information to the lead inspector once it is available. You may wish to use the planning calls to discuss some of this information with the lead inspector before sending it. When information to be emailed includes sensitive personal information, the establishment should take suitable steps to enhance security, for example by protecting documents with a password. There is no need to duplicate the information you provide. For example, information on the prison population that appears in the Ofsted information annex does not need to be repeated as part of the separate request for population statistics.

Other information required by the inspection team

Inspectors will evaluate the establishment's inclusive practices via the [inclusion evaluation area](#).

An important aspect of evaluating inclusion is carrying out [case sampling](#). This

requires, as part of planning, that the nominee provides the lead inspector with information about specific prisoners' barriers to education, skills and work. This will be discussed in detail in part 3 of the [planning call](#).

The lead inspector may also ask the nominee to prepare the following documents for the on-site inspection:

- prison policies and strategies, such as those relating to prisoners' pay, attendance and reading support
- support/learning plans (or equivalent) for specific prisoners
- records of careers information, advice and guidance

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. However, the lead inspector will be sensitive to keeping pre-inspection preparation solely to information essential to the evidence-gathering process.

Role of the nominee

Each establishment is invited to nominate a senior member of staff to support planning, communication and engagement throughout the inspection. Their involvement helps the inspection to run smoothly.

In particular, the role of the nominee is to:

- be the named contact for inspection correspondence
- attend the planning call
- make sure that prisoners, staff and other key stakeholders are informed about the inspection
- brief the establishment's staff about inspection arrangements
- provide information for the lead inspector to support inspection planning
- provide insight into the establishment's context during planning calls
- liaise with the lead inspector and make sure that documents and other information are available, and that staff can attend meetings
- attend regularly planned meetings with inspectors to review evidence and discuss emerging findings and grades
- make sure that appropriate rooms are provided, such as a base room and suitable

rooms for scheduled meetings

- act as the link between the lead inspector and establishment if the establishment wants to raise any issues and concerns or to clarify anything about the inspection
- keep other leaders and managers up to date on the progress of the inspection
- join the lead inspector for inspection activities, where appropriate
- suggest to the inspection team where they could gather additional evidence
- coordinate feedback arrangements, in particular at the end of the inspection

Further information about the nominee

The nominee should have a thorough knowledge of the establishment's programmes and operations, including, where appropriate, those of contractors and subcontractors.

The nominee should be sufficiently senior to ensure the cooperation of staff at all levels. They should have authority to carry out the role with autonomy.

The leader of the establishment may take on this role if they wish to and feel able to.

A member of staff who is also an Ofsted inspector can be a nominee.

Training for nominees is available but not compulsory.

The nominee will not have access to confidential inspection notes or any whistleblowing information.

Nominees will not be present during confidential discussions with prisoners or staff or where their presence could limit open dialogue.

Shadow nominee

Establishments, if they wish, may have a shadow nominee (an employee of the establishment) for staff development purposes as well as their nominee. The shadow nominee will act as an observer. They will not contribute to discussions with inspectors but may take notes and assist with other arrangements. This does not affect the role of the nominee.

Who can attend the final feedback meeting

Those who may attend the final feedback meeting with inspectors include:

- the senior leader (governor or equivalent)
- the head of learning and skills (or equivalent)
- those with responsibility for governance and/or oversight
- the nominee
- the shadow nominee, if one is appointed
- any appropriate person the senior leader wants to be present
- any others agreed between the nominee and the lead inspector to ensure the necessary support for the establishment's leaders

Attendance at the meeting is voluntary. You can find further information about what the lead inspector will discuss during the feedback meeting in the [operating guide for FE and skills inspections](#).

The lead inspector seeks to ensure that the meeting is practical and constructive by managing the number of attendees and the conduct of all attending. They will make sure that leaders know that their input in this meeting is valued.

The lead inspector will make sure that the inspection team has connected the evidence gathered and reflected on it proportionately, which will help leaders to understand the final feedback.

Gathering additional evidence

In some circumstances, we may carry out another visit to the establishment to gather additional evidence. Please see our [gathering additional evidence protocol](#) for further information.

Next steps following our inspection findings

For joint inspections, Ofsted's main findings and (where relevant) concerns are published in HMIP's overall inspection report for the prison/YOI. This is the case for both full inspections and monitoring inspections. Standalone inspections are published by Ofsted.

The next inspection activity will be determined by HMIP's inspection schedule. Ofsted may carry out separate inspections or monitoring inspections of prison education, skills and work.

Leaders should share the inspection findings with those responsible for oversight of the establishment and with whoever they consider appropriate, which may include colleagues, family members, and/or their wider support group; however, the information should not be made public or, when it refers to children in custody, shared with parents until the establishment receives the final report.

Monitoring of prisons and YOIs

We will normally carry out monitoring as part of HMIP's IRPs. We will provide feedback to the head of learning and skills, or equivalent, and the governor. Our findings and progress judgements will be included in the IRP report published by HMIP.

Potential misconceptions about inspection

Toolkit

We do not expect leaders to produce written evidence to support each standard in each evaluation area of the toolkit.

The toolkit focuses on the quality of leaders' choices and decisions, and their impact on prisoners, rather than compliance. It is used to guide conversations, reflect on evidence, and make sure grades reflect the evidence gathered. It supports a shared understanding and discussion of the strengths of the establishment's work, its context, and areas for further exploration.

We do not expect providers to have completed any formal self-evaluation using the toolkit. Leaders will not be at a disadvantage if they do not have a written self-evaluation. In the planning call, we will ask leaders about their perceived strengths and areas for development, using the toolkit as a common focal point. This is to help inspectors plan what inspection activities need to be carried out to gather the necessary evidence to:

- celebrate what leaders have identified as strengths
- validate the priorities leaders have identified for improvement, and whether they have an effective plan to bring about the desired impact
- highlight where there is more to do to ensure that all prisoners engage, achieve and thrive

Curriculum

We do not have a set view about how establishments should approach their curriculums and training plans in education, skills and work.

We evaluate fairly the differing approaches that establishments take to planning and delivering the curriculum and training. Inspectors evaluate an establishment's education, skills and work offer according to the appropriateness of its coverage, content, structure and sequencing, and how effectively it is implemented.

Planning, teaching and assessment

We do not prefer any particular method of planning (including lesson/session/workshop planning), teaching/instructing or assessment. We do not expect a specific format for curriculum or training planning.

We do not require establishments to show us individual lesson plans or previous lesson plans.

We do not grade individual teachers, trainers or instructors.

We do not evaluate individual prisoners and prisoners' work or products, or expect work to be created by them to provide evidence for inspection.

We do not use work scrutiny to evaluate teachers', trainers' or instructors' marking.

We do not require establishments to carry out a specific amount or type of lesson observation.

Safeguarding

Inspectors are always alert to how well prisoners are helped and protected so that they are kept safe. We do not determine a separate safeguarding grade on our inspections of prisons and YOIs. We report any safeguarding concerns we have to the HMIP team leader. During standalone inspections, we take action to raise safeguarding concerns as set out in the [operating guide](#).

Evidence/recordings

We do not require photographic evidence of prisoners' work.

We do not require establishments to share recordings of live lessons or training that are delivered remotely, unless they are normally stored for future use by staff and prisoners.

While we offer leaders the option to use a template to help share information with inspectors as part of the planning call, we do not expect establishments to prepare a presentation or any additional documents about their setting or context for inspection. Inspectors prioritise gathering first-hand evidence during the inspection.

Artificial intelligence

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is not an explicit part of our inspection and regulation frameworks.

There is no specific expectation that a prison or YOI will use AI in a certain way or will use AI at all.

Inspectors do not directly evaluate the use of AI or any AI tool. Our focus is, where relevant, on the quality of decision-making about AI.

Concerns or complaints about an inspection

We take any concerns seriously. Leaders are free to raise concerns and doing so does not negatively affect inspection findings or how we grade a prison or YOI.

If leaders have any concerns about an inspection, including about inspectors' conduct or any potential or perceived conflicts of interest, they should raise these with the lead inspector at the earliest opportunity, to try to resolve issues before the on-site inspection activity is completed.

If leaders cannot resolve their concerns with the lead inspector during the inspection, they can contact a senior Ofsted leader using the number provided as part of the notification process.

If it is not possible to resolve concerns through either of these routes, the establishment or responsible body should follow the steps set out in our [complaints procedure](#).

We respond to any complaints before we finalise the report. If the prison or YOI has highlighted minor points about clarity or factual accuracy in the draft report, it will not normally be able to challenge these or submit a formal complaint about them once the report has been finalised.

When and how reports are published

For inspections carried out with HMIP

The lead inspector will write a draft report and submit this to HMIP.

For standalone inspections

We send draft reports to the establishment following moderation, quality assurance and a consistency check. In most circumstances, this will be within 18 working days of the end of the inspection.

Establishments have 5 working days to comment on the draft report. They can highlight minor points relating to clarity and/or factual accuracy. If they submit only minor points relating to clarity or factual accuracy, we consider these and respond to them when we share the final report. This is normally within 30 working days of the end of the inspection. We may also send the draft report to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and other funding bodies. This takes place only after moderation, quality assurance and consistency checking.

Establishments can also submit a formal [complaint](#) seeking a review of the inspection process, including the grades given, or expressing concerns about inspectors' conduct.

We normally publish the final report on our [reports website](#) 5 working days after sending it to the establishment.

How we handle evidence and personal information

Individuals and organisations are legally required to give us access to information. [Section 131 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) gives our inspectors powers of entry to any premises on which an establishment offers education or training that is publicly funded, and to any of the establishment's premises that it uses in connection with its education or training.

[Section 132 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) gives our inspectors a power to take copies of, or take away, any records and documents relating to the education and training being inspected. This power enables inspectors to look at computers and other devices that may hold information.

Our [privacy policy](#) sets out the personal information we collect in order to inspect an establishment, what we do with it, how long we keep it for, and individuals' rights under data protection legislation.

Inspectors record their notes using our systems. They may see information that contains personal information about staff and prisoners, such as registers and lesson plans. They may take notes from, or copies of, this type of supporting information before returning it to an appropriate staff member at the end of the inspection. Any notes or copies will be stored securely. Inspectors do not retain any inspection notes or supporting information personally. Information gathered electronically, including on laptops, mobile phones and tablets, is transferred securely in line with our security policies.

Research activities on inspection

We may carry out [research](#), based on national priorities, during our inspections. This has no impact on the inspection.

We may use the evidence that inspectors gather during inspections to inform other work, such as national reporting. No personal data obtained as part of the inspection evidence will be used to inform other work.

We may also invite establishments to take part in research visits (separate from inspections) at other times.

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