

Prison learning

Inspectors from Education Scotland evaluate the quality of out-of-cell activities for prisoners on every prison inspection carried out by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland. During the period January 2012 to June 2016, Education Scotland participated in 14 inspections of prisons.

Overall, inspectors found that prisons offered a good range of purposeful learning activities to match the ability, preference and age of most prisoners. Learning was self-directed with appropriate support from tutors where required. A key area noted for improvement by inspectors is the need to improve opportunities for prisoners to progress on to more advanced vocational qualifications, and approaches to gathering feedback from prisoners on the quality and planning of scheduled activities.

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is making good use of external evaluation and research to help inform the learning provision across all 13 of their establishments.

How well do prisoners learn and achieve outcomes?

Overall, we found that prisons offered a good range of purposeful activities to match the ability, preference and age of most prisoners. That range included employment opportunities in a range of areas such as wood assembly, recycling and waste management, grounds maintenance, catering and laundry. Prisons usually also provided vocational training opportunities in construction, horticulture, industrial sewing, cleaning, catering and painting and decorating.

In the Learning Centres, inspectors found that prisoners participated and were successful in a good range of programmes at SCQF levels 2-7, including literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology and core skills courses. However, inspectors found that there were too few opportunities for prisoners to progress on to more advanced vocational qualifications and, in many cases, the awards offered were individual modules rather than full awards.

Many prisoners gained useful employability certificates in industrial cleaning, health and safety, core skills, first aid at work (including CPR), manual handling and fire safety. Smaller groups of prisoners trained for construction site cards and were successful in gaining forklift certificates in preparation for their release. Our evidence shows that there were opportunities for prisoners to participate in work experience outside of their prison, based upon their behaviour inside prison and their proximity to release. However, the range of these experiences, while expanding, was very limited.

How well does the prison service support prisoners to develop and learn?

Inspectors judged that, overall, the quality of activities in the Learning Centres and in vocational programmes was good and engaged most of the prisoners who participated in them. Two colleges delivered the educational programmes in each of the prisons in Scotland. They provided training for teaching staff to deliver a good range of appropriate qualifications. Much of the learning was self-directed, with appropriate support from tutors as required. We found that Learning Centre staff were available on an outreach basis to support theory aspects of the vocational training and to help engage prisoners in basic literacy and numeracy within residential halls, particularly those prisoners classified as protection-regime prisoners.

We highlighted a few examples of digital learning and associated qualifications being offered across the SPS Estate. However, we noted that there was no internet access in any of Scotland's prisons and this was having a major impact on the use of digital skills to support learning.

Inspectors found that the range of activities for those prisoners on remand has improved in the last few years, but there was still a large group of remand prisoners who did not participate in education and vocational programmes. We noted that the low uptake was as a result of poor promotion of activities or their unavailability to remand prisoners.

We observed mostly positive and mutually respectful relationships between prisoners and staff. Prisoners felt that staff supported them well in their activities. Although classes included prisoners of very mixed ability, we saw teaching staff provide good pace and challenge during learning activities. Inspectors noted that many Learning Centres did not have sufficiently robust or systematic processes to identify and support prisoners with additional support needs and staff relied on prisoners disclosing their needs if required. In a number of prisons, activities for protection-regime prisoners were limited.

How well does the prison service improve the quality of its work?

Our evidence shows that SPS made good use of external evaluation and research to help inform the learning provision across all 13 of their establishments. This included a number of recent internal reviews to inform the development of their first Strategy for Learning and Skills and their New Generation Contract, currently delivered by Fife College and New College Lanarkshire.

Within HMYOI Polmont, inspectors were impressed with a major initiative that was being undertaken in redefining the institution as a learning environment. Curriculum for Excellence is being adapted and applied to help meet the learning needs of young people in custody. The Learning Environment Steering Group, comprising key partners, provided effective strategic oversight of education and training provision. It has improved and extended the range of learning provision that it offers, and provided staff with professional development to enable them to meet further the young men's learning needs. This has increased the number of young men who take up opportunities to have their learning recognised and accredited.

Across other prisons, we found that learning activities were planned by staff to meet prisoner needs. Within the restricted environment, we noted the challenge for prisons to involve prisoners in giving feedback on the quality and planning of scheduled activities. As a result, there were limited opportunities for prisoners to influence or shape aspects of their own learning or contribute to the planning of activities offered. Systems and measures to record how many offenders were taking part in learning and what impact this was having are not yet robust. To improve learning further, inspectors identified that the SPS should take a more joined-up and consistent approach to supporting learning across its estate.

Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offenders Institution Polmont

HMYOI Polmont has carried out significant work with a wide range of partners to create a learning environment. Curriculum for Excellence has been adapted to help meet the learning needs of young people who are experiencing their senior phase entitlements in custody and who, in many instances, have specific learning needs.

This, alongside other activities and programmes, which support their social and emotional needs as a result of disadvantage or childhood trauma, has had a positive impact. A now wide-ranging curriculum has resulted in a gradual increase in young men and young women taking up learning activities. There is also an increase in accreditation opportunities, and achievement is recognised and celebrated regularly.

A Learning Environment Steering Group made up of key partners acts as a source of advice and support to the establishment. This helps ensure that the curriculum continues to meet the needs of the young people and equips them with the knowledge and skills to achieve and contribute upon release from custody. The recent introductions of an employability area and throughcare officers are also improving the transition from custody to community by linking young people to support and employability services. This includes housing and benefit services, employment or further education.

