

# Learning and Skills provision by the Northern Ireland Prison Service

February 2012

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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -  
Promoting Improvement*

Criminal Justice Inspection  
Northern Ireland  
*a better justice system for all*







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## List of abbreviations

<b>CJI</b>	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
<b>ETI</b>	Education and Training Inspectorate
<b>HoLS</b>	Head of Learning and Skills
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>NIPS</b>	Northern Ireland Prison Service
<b>NWRC</b>	North West Regional College
<b>OU</b>	Open University
<b>QCF</b>	Qualifications and Credit Framework



## Chief Inspectors' Foreword

The delivery of appropriate learning and skills interventions can have a beneficial impact on the employment opportunities of prisoners and as a consequence an impact on their offending behaviours. Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have longstanding concerns about the quality and impact of the learning and skills provision for prisoners in Northern Ireland.

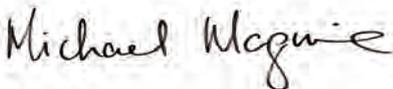
While there have been pockets of excellent and innovative practice, Inspectors have raised concerns in a variety of reports about the outdated curriculum offer, information technology deficits, generally low levels of participation and attendance, often poor library provision, regime restrictions and the adverse impact of industrial action on education classes. This report confirms these concerns and suggests a deteriorating situation.

As a consequence the outcomes for prisoners are poor. The education and skills deficits are significant with over 60% of prisoners below the minimum required level in their essential skills of literacy and/or numeracy. Too few prisoners are being helped to address their deficits and are therefore not being prepared to compete for employment on release.

Current education and skills provision is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS). One of the more positive areas of provision relates to Magilligan Prison where a partnership is in place between the NIPS and the North West Regional College. We believe this model should be developed across the prison service and that more of the NIPS learning and skills provision should be outsourced involving either the public or the private sector as a delivery partner.

The Department of Justice should seek to improve delivery of education provision by enhancing its collaborative approach with the Department for Employment and Learning. In particular it is the view of CJI and ETI that Ministers should ask officials in both Departments to review the outsourcing of learning and skills provision to enable greater flexibility and quality within a challenging timetable.

The inspection was carried out by Tom McGonigle, CJI and Barry O'Rourke, ETI. Our thanks to all those who participated in the inspection process.



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February 2012



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## Recommendation

**A vigorous joint ministerial approach should be adopted to improve the NIPS Learning and Skills provision via the following subsidiary aims:**

- **More of the NIPS Learning and Skills provision should be outsourced;**
- **A managed service solution should be implemented for prison IT systems; and**
- **A senior manager should be appointed to elevate the role of Learning and Skills.**

Section



# Inspection Report



## CHAPTER 1:

# Introduction



- 1.1 Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have longstanding concerns about the quality and impact of the Learning and Skills provision for prisoners in Northern Ireland. This report summarises the main issues and proposes a solution that requires consideration by the Department of Justice and the Department for Employment and Learning.
- 1.2 While there are some pockets of excellent and innovative practice, Inspectors have raised concerns about the outdated curriculum offer, information technology deficits, generally low levels of participation and attendance, the often poor library provision, regime restrictions including frequent class cancellations and the adverse impact of industrial action on education classes. These and other inadequacies mean that learning outcomes for prisoners are often poor; as a result, many of them become frustrated and disengage with the provision.
- 1.3 The education and skills deficits are significant. Data provided by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) shows that over 60% of prisoners are below the minimum required level in their essential skills of literacy and/or numeracy. Despite this, too few prisoners are being helped to address their deficits and are therefore not being adequately prepared to compete for employment on release. The extent of vocational skills provision offered in each prison is both limited and dated, and too little of it is provided at the level required by employers, namely Level 2. The vocational provision is particularly poor for women and younger prisoners, while Open University students need to be especially resilient in order to sustain and complete their programmes of study. Within the context of poor outcomes the NIPS Learning and Skills provision also represents poor value for money: the 2011–2012 budget is £5.1 million.
- 1.4 The most current evidence comes from inspections at Hydebank Wood (March 2011), Magilligan (March 2010) and Maghaberry (January 2009) Prisons, plus follow-up visits undertaken by ETI and CJI in September 2011. It comprises discussions with prisoners, managers and staff, analysis of documentary evidence, including a draft internal review of the NIPS Learning and Skills provision, the annual self-evaluation reports provided by each Learning and Skills department across the prisons, and internal assessments of Information Technology (IT) provision.



- 1.5 There has been some progress such as the appointment of some new Heads of Learning and Skills; the establishment of an Activity and Scheduling Office in Maghaberry Prison in July 2011 “to improve the coordination and delivery of resources to all prisoners...” which was beginning to raise the profile of learning and skills; good, well-established partnerships with the Open University and the North West Regional College (NWRC); and the high levels of commitment and enthusiasm by individual Heads of Learning and Skills, teachers and instructors. However, none of these steps have yet been able to address sufficiently the fundamental failings.
- 1.6 ETI and CJI concerns are amplified in the three sections below – Strategy, Delivery, and Outcomes. These are followed by supporting evidence from the previous inspections and the findings of the Prison Review Team which reported in October 2011.

## CHAPTER 2:

# Strategy



- 2.1 At a strategic level, Learning and Skills is much too low a priority within the prisons. It is widely accepted that effective education and skills provision can greatly assist prisoners' personal development and self-esteem, and that prisons are much easier to manage when prisoners are engaged in purposeful activities. However, the Heads of Learning and Skills at the NIPS Headquarters and Magilligan Prison were not members of the senior management teams; and while the Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood Heads of Learning and Skills were on the senior management teams, they believed they were not able to be sufficiently influential. Consequently, there is a lack of strategic vision and impetus, and they are frequently not consulted on key decisions that directly impact on the services they are expected to deliver. The evidence shows that this key group of senior managers feel undervalued within the NIPS, and without exception they expressed considerable frustrations around the current poor state of education and skills.
- 2.2 Senior managers lacked clarity about their responsibility to promote Learning and Skills. Governors assured Inspectors they valued the role played by Learning and Skills, but very significantly acknowledged that it had a relatively low

priority in their security-dominated environments. They highlighted:

- Poor line management of some Learning and Skills staff, where supervision and appraisal processes are not properly implemented, and the persistent underperformance of some of the teaching/tutoring staff is not adequately addressed. This led, for example, to development of unorthodox local IT procurement practices. A December 2010 report into IT management in the Learning and Skills department at Maghaberry Prison suggested there was "*Poor performance and absence of effective policies... significant shortcomings in relation to procurement and inventory practices...lack of effective management... ineffective reporting lines...general sense of confusion and lack of direction...inventory of hardware and software was haphazard and incomplete...In short there was an absence of governance*".
- The vocational skills curriculum did not reflect closely enough the current world of work. It was still construction-dominated whereas contemporary opportunities were more likely to be available in areas such as catering, recycling and the service industries.



2.3 The quality of the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes continues to be an area for improvement across the prisons. The senior managers with responsibility for this at the NIPS Headquarters have not made enough progress in this important area and the process remains at an early stage.

## CHAPTER 3:

# Delivery



3.1 In terms of delivery there are several failings including serious staff shortages, major IT deficits, low levels of engagement and attendance at classes, and generally low utilisation of the library provision. Due to a moratorium on staff recruitment, temporary contracts were being used to fill vacancies. From a Maghaberry Prison population of 899 on 26 August 2011, scheduled class attendance represented only 17% of the total population; and actual attendance represented only 14% of the total. When Inspectors visited on 16 September 2011, there were only 15 prisoners attending classes in an excellent new facility – the music, cookery, art, barbering and other general classrooms were all closed.

3.2 The Heads of Learning and Skills within the individual establishments and at the NIPS Headquarters should be a key group of influential managers. They expressed considerable frustration about the current lowly status of Learning and Skills within the service and reported:

- Frequent lockups and other regime restrictions which curtail prisoners' access to classes, and short notice cancellation of classes when staff shortages occur in other parts of the prison. Even at Magilligan Prison,

which has a relatively stable population, the Head of Learning and Skills estimated that prisoners who were allocated to full-time education attended class up to a maximum of 15 hours per week.

- Many areas which impact directly on Learning and Skills lie outside the Head of Learning and Skills control or even influence. For example, Learning and Skills is of such low priority at Magilligan Prison that it is not recognised as part of the prisoners' core day. Thus participation in outdoor football takes precedence over attendance at classes.
- An unwieldy Human Resources system means there is no cover for absences, and major timetabling gaps have developed as retired staff have not been replaced in a timely manner. This results in regular cancellation of classes, extensive waiting lists for some courses and a very disjointed learning experience for prisoners.
- Procurement processes were reported as tedious. For example, a theatre company which offered to deliver free drama and writing workshops to prisoners was informed



that they would have to submit a tender, and consequently the opportunity was lost.

3.3 The quality of the NIPS Learning and Skills IT systems is especially problematic, for two reasons:

- IT technical support is inadequate. It consists of two personnel from Headquarters who can only provide four and a half hours support each week to Hydebank Wood and Magilligan Prisons, and six hours each week to Maghaberry Prison. These notional allocations are seldom actually delivered. Regular hardware malfunctions and software incompatibilities frustrate staff and prisoners, especially those who are engaged in programmes of study that require internet access. Despite an investment in interactive whiteboard technology, it is currently not being exploited due to lack of connectivity and prisoners are using outdated technology (floppy discs) in an attempt to circumvent the shortcomings. The review of IT provision at Maghaberry Prison was completed in December 2010. It made several helpful recommendations but these had not been implemented by October 2011.
- IT security is a major problem for both teaching staff and prisoners. When an infringement occurs, all staff and prisoners face immediate and prolonged restrictions on computer usage which grossly hampers participation in learning activity. For example, an IT breach by one prisoner in Maghaberry Prison in December 2010 meant that Open University students were unable to

access internet-based learning opportunities for months afterwards. The Heads of Learning and Skills are not consulted about such matters; rather they are simply informed of decisions taken by senior managers, invariably on security rather than educational grounds. While the importance of proper IT security is not underestimated, the current approach is not working.

## CHAPTER 4:

# Outcomes



- 4.1 With the exception of the outsourced essential skills provision in Magilligan Prison, outcomes for prisoners in accredited programmes are often poor. Too few are being provided with the required literacy and numeracy skills to participate meaningfully in appropriate resettlement activities to improve their prospects of attaining and sustaining paid employment. In Hydebank Wood for example, none of the prisoners had achieved an IT qualification in some years, and a new library at Magilligan Prison was underused due to IT deficiencies. In addition, Open University students in each prison were falling behind as internet access was severely restricted or completely unavailable for long and indeterminate periods of time. As a result many prisoners become frustrated and cynical and either do not sign up for education at all, or quickly become disengaged with the provision.
- 4.2 Many prisoners reported to Inspectors that they were uninvolved and not interested in Learning and Skills. Several who had expressed an interest in education however, and had even applied for classes, reported they had waited up to six weeks since expressing interest, but received no feedback about what was happening or the reasons for delay. Those already involved in education
- were complimentary about most of the teachers and instructors, but identified numerous impediments with the regime. In particular, they reported that security considerations consistently outweighed rehabilitation opportunities such as participation in education.
- 4.3 The prisoners also reported that collective punishment was often applied when individual transgressions were committed, as the NIPS practice was to react quickly and in a universal fashion. For example, when a prisoner was caught attempting to smuggle a memory pen that contained inappropriate materials into Magilligan Prison in September 2011, all external computer ports in the Learning and Skills computers were sealed. This completely halted essential internet access for the significant number of Open University students and inhibited the portability of their assignment and other files.
- 4.4 Around 54% (14 out of 26) of the prisoners at Maghaberry Prison who were studying with the Open University had disengaged from their learning since January 2011, due to an IT infringement by an individual prisoner. Some of those who continued on courses had to change to other programmes which they felt to be much less interesting and not offering similar career prospects, as a



result of internet access being denied.

- 4.5 Many of the life-sentenced prisoners held in Maghaberry's Braid and Wilson Houses were reluctant to go to the new Learning and Skills Centre in the main prison because it took too long. They had to be transported there by minibus and could be delayed for several hours when there was a security alert. The new Learning and Skills Centre was described by them as "excellent," but life prisoners felt that in addition to being located in the wrong place, it was delivering the wrong courses. The short (six week) courses on offer may meet the needs of short term prisoners, but they were considered inappropriate for life and other long-term prisoners.

## CHAPTER 5:

# Summary inspection findings



5.1 Relevant conclusions from previous inspections of each prison and extracts from the October 2011 Prison Review Team report are set out below. They confirm the latest inspection findings and support our contention that interdepartmental collaboration is essential if the NIPS Learning and Skills failings are to be redressed on a long-term basis.

5.2 **Hydebank Wood YOC and Women's Prison (March 2011)**

*“There was no coherent learning and skills strategy that provided any differentiation according to sentence length or the specific needs of different groups such as children. The curriculum was outdated and did not match the needs of the prisoners, employers or the local labour market. There was a need to establish effective collaboration partnerships with external education and training providers, such as further education and/or work-based learning suppliers, as a matter of urgency. There was insufficient identification of learning needs to address barriers to learning and quality assurance and review arrangements were weak. Some serious problems of teaching and underachievement had not been identified and many prisoners with low levels of literacy and numeracy did not have their needs met. While some of the teaching*

*observed was good, standards observed in information technology (IT) and some of the essential skills were inadequate. In IT there had been no achievement of a qualification for some years. Links between Learning and Skills and resettlement had improved but there was too much emphasis on just filling places rather than ensuring individuals were appropriately placed. Despite this approach, the education and training capacity was substantially underused.”*

5.3 **Magilligan Prison (March 2010)**

*“The education and skills provision was generally satisfactory, but there was insufficient strategic direction to ensure that the needs of all prisoners were met and learning and skills were not given a sufficiently high priority or well promoted. About 20% of prisoners did not have allocated activity and, although there were enough places to occupy the population, many places could not be used due to operational restrictions. Quality assurance arrangements were basic, but adequate, and self-evaluation was at an early stage of development. Access to education programmes was mostly good. There were some good resources and equipment, but they were not always used as effectively as they might because of a lack of technical support. A good partnership had been established with the local further education*



college, which provided most of the essential skills and IT programmes. There were potentially 158 listed places in education, but only 119 could be used because of restrictive officer staffing agreements. The capacity available was not fully utilised and attendance was variable and sometimes poor. The quality of most of the teaching observed was good or better and some was outstanding. Prisoners undertaking higher-level courses got good help and encouragement from education staff, but were hampered by lack of facilities in the prison to support their studies. Demand for many of the vocational training programmes was high, but, as in education, attendance was often too low. The range of vocational skills was good, but not all had sufficient progression opportunities. Standards of work in the production workshops were good or excellent. There was effective use of project-based learning in workshops, but more could have been done to incorporate essential skills.”

#### 5.4 **Maghaberry Prison (January 2009)**

“There had been insufficient analysis of the educational needs of the population and the development of a strategy to meet those needs. The range of education provision had increased a little, including more English for speakers of other languages, but there was still much unmet need and very little for prisoners on remand. A high proportion, about 327 prisoners, were involved in education and were positive about it, but could attend for only a maximum of three sessions each week. Most attended for only two and not all classes were full, with attendance averaging 70%. Afternoon classes often did not begin on time and ended early resulting in very short sessions. The standards of

teaching and learning were generally good, with good relationships and very supportive staff. Quality assurance arrangements had just been introduced and more effective use of data was needed to promote improvement. There were 80 vocational training places in workshops for 20% of the sentenced population. In addition, there were another 172 work opportunities primarily for sentenced prisoners, including about 100 orderly roles on wings. This was not enough, yet not all activity places were used or allocated. When we checked, fewer than half of the 80 workshop places were used and only 123 of the other 172 work places. Management of movement to workshops was better so prisoners arrived on time and remained all day in the workshop area, but they left earlier than scheduled. For those involved, the standard of training and learning was generally good and allowed men to achieve accredited qualifications matched to future work aspirations, but at too low a level.”

#### 5.5 **The Prison Review Team** commented extensively on Learning and Skills deficits in its October 2011 report:

“The Department for Employment and Learning has not so far been a key partner in the planning and delivery of education and skills training in prisons. Except in Magilligan, where there has been some positive engagement with North West Regional College, prison education and training operates in a vacuum, delivering courses that may or may not be relevant to prisoners’ needs or employment possibilities and which are often disrupted or under-used because of regime restrictions. The funding arrangements that further education colleges rely on...have proved unworkable in a prison setting, particularly prisons which hold short-term prisoners. It



*has therefore been uneconomic for colleges to provide services into Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood.” (Page 59)*

*The Review Team went on to say “the prison service cannot be relied upon to ensure consistent access for outside agencies into the prison, or for prisoners to education and work opportunities. Prison regimes are not configured around education, training and purposeful activity as a core and essential part of the prison day: for example, a state of the art education centre at Maghaberry is under-used and under-developed. Like all the other agencies, from health to education, who are putting, or who might put, resources into prisons, external partners cannot be sure that some of that investment will not be wasted because of regime shut-downs or restrictions on access. Moreover, many opportunities are missed – for example, the possibility of external employers coming in to the prison to run work training projects.” (Page 60)*

*“We remain convinced that it is only by bringing in external expertise, from a director who has worked with and through outside training or resettlement work, that there will be the required drive, understanding and approach.” (Page 60)*

- 5.6 Further to the publication of the above review, the Department for Employment and Learning formally responded to the Department of Justice on 21 December 2011 reaffirming its commitment to the development and renewal of effective partnerships. The response highlighted that funding for Essential Skills is based on timetabled hours, with colleges paid for the time they teach students and not on the achievement of qualifications.



## CHAPTER 6:

# Proposed solutions



- 6.1 It is the professional view of ETI and CJI that there are areas where collaborative ministerial intervention, requiring departmental officials to work together to produce solutions within a challenging timetable, could prove beneficial. The problems are challenging but surmountable, and we would emphasise that, given the current budget for Learning and Skills within the NIPS, this is not primarily a resource issue. Previous inspection reports have made recommendations that, if implemented, should improve Learning and Skills and most of these are still extant. They include promptly filling vacant posts, elevating the status of Heads of Learning and Skills to participate more meaningfully in the senior management teams at the NIPS Headquarters and in the prisons, and establishing an effective Scheduling and Activity function in each prison.
- 6.2 In our view there are three particular areas which would benefit from joint ministerial attention: outsourcing of provision, a managed IT solution and the appointment of a senior Learning and Skills manager.
- Outsourcing**
- 6.3 Inspectors are very positive about the essential skills provision delivered at Magilligan Prison through an external partnership with the NWRC. In addition, collaboration with the Open University is clearly beneficial for many prisoners, particularly the more able and those who have progressed from lower levels of provision.
- 6.4 While there may be a role for several Northern Ireland Government Departments in supporting the NIPS, there would be particular value in the Department of Justice enhancing its collaborative approach to a higher level with the Department for Employment and Learning. The partnership between the NWRC and Magilligan Prison works to good effect because the Magilligan Prison population consists entirely of sentenced prisoners and consequently is relatively stable, which means class numbers are more predictable. However, this particular model is more challenging to replicate in Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood Prisons, with their high remand populations and therefore high levels of prisoner turnover.
- 6.5 Effective collaborative partnerships with external providers are an important part of the way forward, in particular the delivery of Essential Skills within the unique context of a prison. The partnership between the NWRC and Magilligan Prison, for example, ensures



continuity and availability of teaching staff at all times. Extension of the Magilligan Prison partnership and development of similar partnerships at Hydebank Wood and Maghaberry Prisons could remedy the frequent and prolonged cancellations that occur when NIPS teachers or instructors are unavailable due to sick leave, annual leave, training or short notice redeployment to other activities within the prison. Collaborative partnerships also offer the NIPS a range of options with regard to a contemporary skills curriculum which would prepare prisoners much better for competing in the employment market upon release, or indeed for a period of suitable work experience prior to release.

- 6.6 Another area of potential benefit for the NIPS should be to explore opportunities for sharing of the education provision based at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC). Woodlands has excellent education resources and a successful education model for children in custody. The JJC currently works with Hydebank Wood Prison on other matters of mutual interest, and extension of its education practice and teaching and other resources would undoubtedly benefit younger prisoners there.

### **A managed IT service solution**

- 6.7 Involvement of a proven external provider to design and maintain an IT system suitable for all the NIPS Learning and Skills needs has the potential to remedy security and technical support difficulties, thus removing a significant risk. A successful managed service has been run across all of the primary and post-primary schools in Northern

Ireland for the past 10 years, and something similar should be considered for the small number of prison establishments. This would also mean that risks associated with IT breaches would sit in the main outside the NIPS. In addition, all prisoners participating in Learning and Skills activities should be provided with a Unique Learner Number. As well as access to the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), it would benefit prisoners as they are moved around the prison system.

### **Appointment of a senior manager for Learning and Skills**

- 6.8 While Inspectors have made numerous recommendations to improve the Learning and Skills provision in prisons, progress has been negligible for a variety of reasons. Indeed the most recent evidence would suggest it is deteriorating further. A key factor has been the low status afforded to Learning and Skills at the NIPS Headquarters and in the individual prisons. It is our view that the required improvements will not take place unless high level strategic leadership is in place. An appropriate appointment of someone with experience of the external Learning and Skills environment, as well as knowledge of the prison education system is essential to drive forward essential changes over the next three to five years.
- 6.9 In summary, the NIPS Learning and Skills suffers from a range of deficiencies which are undermining outcomes for prisoners. There is wide support for positive change across the system and we urge consideration of the important issues raised in this report by the



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relevant Ministers of the appropriate Northern Ireland Government Departments.

**We recommend a vigorous joint ministerial approach should be adopted to improve the NIPS Learning and Skills provision via the following subsidiary aims:**

- *More of the NIPS Learning and Skills provision should be outsourced;*
- *A managed service solution should be implemented for prison IT systems; and*
- *A senior manager should be appointed to elevate the role of Learning and Skills.*





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