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Dear Mr Firmston

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: numeracy – tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 21 September 2010 to look at your work in numeracy.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with learners, staff of the Prison Service, and staff of Kensington and Chelsea College who are the contracted learning provider; scrutiny of relevant documents; visits to the education department and vocational and contract workshops; and observation of two learning sessions.

Overall, HMP Belmarsh is satisfactory at tackling the challenge of ensuring that adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives.

Key findings

- The prison and college staff work well to ensure that a high proportion of prisoners take the initial screening assessment in numeracy. However, as the college has identified, the assessment does not provide sufficiently detailed data on prisoners' levels of skills. For example, the assessment used by the prison is only up to and including level 1. Learners who attend education classes and vocational training receive appropriate further diagnostic assessments.
- Staff from the prison and the college have successfully increased the profile of numeracy (and literacy) through effective and well managed partnership work. Careers guidance, activities and materials in the library,

and visits to accommodation blocks have helped raise awareness of the different types of programmes available to help prisoners improve their numeracy skills. Sentence planning now highlights the need for skills for life qualifications.

- The numeracy provision in the vocational workshops has developed well, with particularly effective partnership work between education staff and vocational instructors. Similarly, the college is managing the introduction of functional mathematics well through the use of partnerships and investment in resources.
- The prison's strategic development plan for education and skills provision does not identify in sufficient detail how it plans to meet the numeracy need but it does provide information on the different assessed levels of numeracy up to and including level 1. Many of the classes in education, such as in music and drug and alcohol awareness, cover relevant numeracy skills. However, the prison has not carried out a sufficiently detailed analysis of numeracy skills required for everyday activities across the prison, including work in accommodation blocks such as in cleaning and catering, or in preparation for resettlement.
- The numeracy tutors all have teaching qualifications, but none of them has a specialist qualification in teaching numeracy. The college and the prison provide appropriate generic training for college staff, and the numeracy tutors work well together to share good practice. However, they do not have sufficient specialist support and opportunities to develop their skills in teaching numeracy to adults.
- The teaching and learning sessions observed were satisfactory. The presentations were enthusiastic and energetic and learners participated well in a good range of practical activities. The tutors had developed interesting learning materials and practical resources. They made good use of different contexts to teach numeracy, especially in provision added to vocational training courses. The college is developing appropriate materials for functional mathematics. The peer mentor provides useful support to learners in education classes. However, the less successful aspects of the sessions did not focus sufficiently on ensuring that learners understood the mathematical concepts they were working on.
- Individual learning plans identify a satisfactory range of mathematical topics identified as priority learning goals following appropriate diagnostic assessments. However, the short-term goals are not sufficiently detailed and records of feedback to learners are too vague.
- Retention rates are good and a good proportion of learners achieve a qualification in numeracy. In 2009–10, 185 (84%) of the 220 learners gained a certificate in numeracy from entry level 1 to level 2. Many learners interviewed said they had gained practical skills, especially in the vocational workshop, and they were pleased that they had more confidence in carrying out calculations. However, the prisoners interviewed who did not attend numeracy provision talked about receiving informal support with the numeracy skills they needed in prison by getting help from officers or fellow prisoners.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that initial assessments provide accurate information on prisoners' levels of numeracy, and that prison staff use this information effectively to evaluate the extent to which prisoners with low levels of numeracy take up the provision available
- carrying out an analysis of the numeracy skills that prisoners need at the different stages of custody, including in employment, on interventions such as offending behaviour management programmes and in preparation for resettlement into the community
- developing a strategy for purposeful activities that ensures that a higher proportion of prisoners with low levels of numeracy take up training and learning opportunities to improve the skills relevant to their needs
- providing training and development for the staff teaching numeracy to help them to increase their expertise in teaching numeracy and gain specialist qualifications.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at HMP Belmarsh.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to the Skills Funding Agency and will be published on the Ofsted website under the URN for HMP Belmarsh. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Karen Adriaanse
Her Majesty's Inspector