

Bedfordshire Probation Area

Inspection report

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Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) works in partnership with Her Majesty's Inspectorates of Prison and Probation and inspects the management and provision of learning and skills for offenders across the whole range of custodial establishments and probation areas. Inspections may include those serving whole or part of their sentence in the community.

Inspectors judge the quality of the provision against the Common Inspection Framework for further education and skills from September 2009 and contribute to the inspection frameworks of Her Majesty's Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation.

Information about the probation area

Bedfordshire Probation Area (Bedfordshire Probation) is one of the smallest probation areas, with an annual budget of £8 million. Bedfordshire Probation delivers some 88,000 hours of unpaid work each year. Bedfordshire Probation has two approved premises which provide hostel accommodation for offenders released on licence; one in Luton for men and one in Bedford for women. There is a category B prison in Bedford.

The Head of Business Development and Interventions is responsible for learning and employability, supported by the joint unpaid work and contracted services manager. All Bedfordshire Probation's learning and employability services are provided through third party contracted providers, apart from the Citizen's Advice Bureau who contract directly with Bedfordshire Probation.

The minority ethnic population in Bedford is 13% and 28% in Luton. The unemployment rate in Bedford is 5% and 10% in Luton. Within the current caseload, some 90% are men and 70% are white. About three-quarters of offenders were unemployed when they committed their crime. Lack of education, training and or employment were criminogenic factors for about 65% of offenders, and for both men and women this was the third highest factor.

Information about the offender learning and employability providers:

Lead OLASS providers and their subcontractors	Number of learners on discrete provision in 2008/09	Types of provision at the time of the inspection
Bedfordshire Adult and Community Learning and Luton Borough Council Adult and Community Learning	270 attended for initial assessment; 120 attended Skills for Life provision	Skills for Life and nextstep services

Lead OLASS providers and their subcontractors (cont.)	Number of learners on discrete provision in 2008/09	Types of provision at the time of the inspection
Bedford Institute of Technology	1000 attended inductions to unpaid work, including health, initial assessments and safety training and initial information, advice and guidance interviews; 120 attended literacy and numeracy and 80 attended employability skills programmes	learndirect, vocational qualifications, nextstep services, Skills for Jobs, Response for redundancy, Way to Go (ESF).
Other providers	Number of learners	Type of provision
Citizen's Advice Bureau	20	Finance and debt through specified activity requirements in both Luton and Bedford funded by Bedfordshire Probation
Luton Foyer	New provider since June 2009	nextstep services, Learning and employability support activities, basic IT courses.
Turning Point, Luton	Variable	Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funded Pathway 2 Work programme offering wide ranging individual support including Skills for Life and top-up vocational training.

The following text is Ofsted's contribution to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation's offender management inspection.

Summary report

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade: satisfactory
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Capacity to improve	Grade: satisfactory
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	Grade descriptor
Quality of provision	satisfactory
Assessment and sentence planning	
Implementation of interventions	
Achieving and sustaining outcomes	satisfactory
Leadership and management	satisfactory
Equality and diversity	satisfactory
Safeguarding	satisfactory

Overall effectiveness, including capacity to improve

Bedfordshire Probation's arrangements for learning and employability activities, as required by the courts, were good. Inductions were well planned but the quality of information available to providers to support inductions was inconsistent. The arrangements to support offenders with specific learning needs were insufficient.

Offenders benefited from an increasingly comprehensive range of provision. The development of learning and skills was good. The arrangements for the delivery of aspects of learning and employability through unpaid work inductions were very effective. Teaching and learning were mundane. Offenders and staff made insufficiently effective use of individual learning plans. The recording of offenders' employability skills developed through many community payback schemes was insufficient.

Achievements in health and safety were good, and the employment outcomes for offenders on the Path2Work project were also good. The number of offenders who completed their programme and achieved qualifications in literacy and numeracy was low. Attendance in sessions was low.

Bedfordshire Probation's operational management of learning and employability provision was good, but the strategy was insufficiently planned. The quality of the provision had improved since the last inspection, but systems to support quality improvement needed further development.

What does Bedfordshire Probation Area need to do to improve further?

- Improve systems to identify and support offenders with specific learning needs by raising offender managers' awareness of learning difficulties through training and ensuring access to sufficient specialist assessment opportunities and adequate staffing for the numbers of offenders requiring specific learning support.
- Improve the arrangements for sharing information between offender managers and providers by ensuring that offender managers can effectively access offenders' learning plans and their progress reviews and providing them with evidence of offenders' progress on community payback schemes.
- Plan and implement a strategy for improving the learning and skills provision by further developing quality improvement practices and provision to support the action plan for reducing re-offending.

Offender perspective - learning and employability as confirmed by inspectors.

A total of 19 offenders were interviewed as part of the inspection process, individually or in groups. Most offenders felt that the information they had about their sentence from the courts and from their offender managers was scant and not always very helpful. However, they valued the pre-placement work session at Bedford Institute of Technology and generally felt the health and safety qualification was useful. All offenders remembered their initial assessment and those who had further tests mostly knew what they needed to work on. All offenders valued the opportunity to gain skills on community payback schemes and in Skills for Life programmes. Many offenders said they would complete their programme even if it continued beyond the end of their order. Those who had the opportunity to gain skills valued that, although some said they felt unchallenged by the schemes they were on. Many said they valued the support they received from staff, particularly offenders on Skills for Life programmes. Offenders at one centre commented on the rigid approach of some staff and a few said they felt patronised by them. All offenders said they were pleased when they achieved qualifications although some more able offenders reported that they were only repeating work they had previously done.

Main inspection report

The quality of provision

Grade: satisfactory

Assessment and sentence planning

Bedfordshire Probation's arrangements for the use of an education, training and employment activity as required by the courts, were good. They had devised five well structured requirements covering literacy and numeracy, employability and finance and debt. At the time of the inspection over 20 activity requirements were in use.

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However, some offenders were not screened appropriately for their literacy or numeracy at the start of their sentence.

Learning and employability related induction arrangements were good. All offenders, referred to a learning and skills provider or attending an induction for unpaid work, completed an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy. In most cases they knew their assessment scores and the level they had reached. If offenders joined classes they were given further diagnostic assessments, but the usefulness of the tests used varied between providers. The results of these tests were not shared effectively with offender managers. The provision of information, advice and guidance for referred offenders at the start of their sentence was well planned. Offenders agreed an action plan which tackled their immediate needs and identified a preferred community payback scheme. Advisers paid insufficient attention agreeing actions to resolve longer-term employability needs. All providers had suitably qualified advisers.

Arrangements to support offenders with specific learning needs were insufficient. Assessment and support, to meet the needs of offenders with dyslexia and the provision of English for speakers of other languages were inadequate. Some offender managers were unsure how to work effectively with offenders with learning difficulties such as Asperger's Syndrome. Only Luton Borough Council's service provided an assessment of offender learning styles but this information was not shared effectively with offender managers.

The availability of information relevant to the needs of providers in order to support offenders was inconsistent. Too often, evidence of the achievements, purposeful activities, and support for resettlement that offenders took whilst in prison was unavailable. The quality of information on referral forms received by providers from offender managers was variable.

Implementation of interventions

Offenders could access an increasingly comprehensive range of provision. This included the provision of literacy and numeracy, information advice and guidance, employability and job seeking skills, finance and debt. Bedfordshire Probation was working effectively to improve opportunities for offenders by referring them to the most appropriate support services. Some offenders did not receive sufficient support for managing disclosure of their offences. The proportion of offenders identified with a learning or employability need who started a programme was low. Women offenders in approved premises had access to a good range of provision.

Bedfordshire Probation's developments, in partnership working with providers, to support the delivery of the sentence plan objectives were good. Providers' access to the case management database had improved information sharing. Opportunities for offenders to learn at Bedfordshire Probation's own centres had improved, particularly benefiting those offenders who previously had poor experiences of education. One provider had developed an electronic communication system to keep offender

managers informed of their offenders' progress. Bedfordshire Probation's links with employers were underdeveloped.

The arrangements for the delivery of learning and skills through unpaid work activities were good. Bedfordshire Probation had worked well with Bedford Institute of Technology to establish mutually beneficial arrangements for the induction programme for offenders starting community payback schemes. Offenders could benefit by making use of 20% of their unpaid work order for learning and employability activities at the start of their sentence.

Much teaching was planned satisfactorily and included a sufficient variety of activities to involve offenders. Tutors gave good support to offenders to reduce the barriers which limited their learning. However, in many sessions teaching and learning were mundane. Too much work was centred on the tutors and on the completion of handouts. In many sessions, some of the more able offenders were insufficiently challenged. A few tutors were relatively inexperienced and did not plan sufficient opportunities to adequately assess and reinforce learning. Some members of staff teaching Skills for Life did not have sufficient specialist qualifications. No member of staff had a qualification relevant to support offenders who needed support to improve their English.

Much of the teaching accommodation was good and spacious and a range of appropriate resources were available for offenders. However, tutors did not always make the best use of these resources to provide group work and opportunities for interaction.

Not all staff ensured that relevant offenders designated at Offender Management Tier 2 and above completed a full assessment of need as required by the National Probation Service national standards.

Staff made insufficiently effective use of individual learning plans. All offenders had plans, but these varied in quality and in style. Offenders in Luton used better plans. Many plans had too few short term targets to help offenders decide how to progress their work. Often, broader targets were not specific and measurable and some only restated the requirements of the qualification. Some offenders had a copy of their individual learning plan but many did not. Individual learning plans and the progress offenders made were not shared effectively with offender managers.

The recording of employability skills developed through community payback schemes was insufficient. Bedfordshire Probation provided offenders with many good quality schemes. The 'Recycle a Cycle' scheme provided offenders with opportunities to link skills development to vocational qualifications. A few offenders on conservation projects could take qualifications with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. On the other schemes staff placed insufficient emphasis on recording improvements in behaviour and employability. Offenders were not able to demonstrate these improvements effectively to support an application for employment.

Achieving and sustaining outcomes

Grade: satisfactory

Offenders' achievements in health and safety were good. Most offenders achieved a certificate in health and safety in the workplace during their induction for unpaid work. Many offenders were motivated by their success. They had a good understanding of health and safety in the workplace and felt safe. Bedfordshire Probation completed effective risk assessments of community payback schemes and the tools they were using.

Offenders who completed the Path2Work project achieved good employment outcomes. Seventy eight percent of offenders who started work through this project moved into sustained employment. Many offenders on community payback schemes recognised the value to the community of the work they were undertaking and took pride in the work they had completed.

Between 2007/08 and 2008/09 success rates in literacy and numeracy increased, but at 50% remained low. However, success rates in learndirect provision were satisfactory. Similarly attendance improved in 2009/10 in response to organisational wide actions, but at 63% remained low and was poor at the Foyer in Luton.

Leadership and management

Grade: satisfactory

Bedfordshire Probation's operational management of learning and skills provision was good. At partnership meetings with providers, Bedfordshire Probation placed a strong focus on performance and identifying and removing barriers to achievement. Agreed action plans to support delivery of contracts, included clearly identified responsibilities for both providers and Bedfordshire Probation. Offender managers were represented at these meetings to provide a wider perspective. Bedfordshire Probation had a well developed strategy to encourage offender managers to recognise the importance of learning and employability to offenders. Bedfordshire Probation's managers worked effectively to identify new resources to provide a wider range of services for offenders. Developments in unpaid work were good. Bedfordshire Probation managed unpaid work supervisors closely to support the consistency of the provision. Supervisors were well supported through an effective training programme and performance management system. The organisation of unpaid work was effective and provided sufficient places for offenders. Completion rates were satisfactory.

The strategy for learning and employability was planned insufficiently. References to learning and skills in Bedfordshire Probation's business development plan were limited. Planning was insufficiently informed by a needs analysis linked to offending behaviour. Further developments, in response to the Jobcentre Plus regional strategy, were in the advanced stages of planning. This included the introduction of a Jobcentre Plus adviser in Luton from January 2010.

Quality improvement arrangements were underdeveloped. Bedfordshire Probation did not have effective procedures in place to be assured of the quality of each provider's provision. Bedfordshire Probation's use of internal targets and benchmarks

to support quality improvements needed further development. Providers had met to identify and share good practice and had suitable arrangements for gathering offenders' views. Bedfordshire Probation's arrangements for gathering the views of offenders provided insufficient focus on the quality of provision.

Equality and diversity were satisfactory as were safeguarding arrangements to support offenders as vulnerable adults. Bedfordshire Probation had an up-to-date single equality scheme and action plan. In the plan, they recognised the need to carry out more detailed diversity monitoring. Bedfordshire Probation had developed an action plan to tackle the specific needs of women. A relevant programme of learning and skills was being introduced. Bedfordshire Probation provided a more appropriately supportive learning environment for those offenders with more individual needs, through the adult and community learning providers, and more challenge, for those who were personally more confident, through learndirect provision. Bedfordshire Probation provided suitable arrangements for offenders who needed to travel from Luton to attend in Bedford. However, offenders in some parts of the area did not have suitable access to services to support their childcare needs. In most cases offender managers ensured that all relevant staff were effectively aware of offenders' diversity needs. Offenders felt safe and generally respected. All providers completed an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check for relevant staff. Appropriate policies were in place and staff had received recent training on risk assessments. The two adult and community learning providers were judged to be meeting government's requirements at the time of their last inspection.

Information about the inspection

1. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), assisted by Bedfordshire Probation's Head of Business Development and Interventions as co-ordinator, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of Bedfordshire Probation's most recent self-assessment reports and development plans, previous inspection reports, reports from the inspectorate's monitoring visit and data on offenders and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
2. Inspectors used a range of methods to gather the views of offenders including group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires offenders had completed. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subjects the provider offers.

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