

Essex Probation Area

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 57970

Name of lead inspector: Stephen Miller HMI

Last day of inspection: 4 December 2009

Type of provider: Essex Probation Area

Address: Cullen Mill
49 Braintree Road
Witham Essex
CM8 2DD.

Telephone number: Tel: 01376 501626

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

Essex has the sixth highest population England (1.6 million). With six major towns: Chelmsford; Harlow; Grays; Basildon; Southend and Colchester, Essex accounts for a quarter of the east of England region's population. Essex Probation Area (Essex Probation) is the eighth largest in England. The governance of Essex is complex, with one two-tier local authority, New Essex, and two unitary authorities, Southend and Thurrock.

Within these boundaries are 14 districts and boroughs, each having local governance, mirrored by 14 crime and disorder reduction partnerships and local strategic partnerships. Essex Probation supervises around 7,000 offenders at any one time, produces over 5,000 pre-sentence reports each year and employs over 500 staff to provide these services. Essex Probation's six local delivery units, one in each of the major towns, have boundaries that are coterminous with the courts. Milton Keynes College is the main Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) contractor. The college also delivers learning and skills provision in HMPs Chelmsford, Bullwood Hall and The Mount.

The Director of Interventions has overall responsibility for education, training and employment. Approximately 9500 hours of unpaid work take place each month. The number of Essex residents from minority ethnic groups represents 5.5% of the population. In addition to the provision provided under the OLASS contract, offenders access individual support from a range of organisations throughout the county such as the Princes Trust, the National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NACRO) and Supporting Others through Voluntary Action (SOVA). Approved premises are available at Basildon, providing hostel accommodation for offenders released on licence. A variety of community payback projects are in place across the county

Information about the lead offender learning and employability providers:

Lead OLASS providers and their subcontractors	Number of learners on discrete provision	Types of provision
Southend Adult Community College	137	Skills for Life manual handling/ health and safety, key skills
Chelmsford College	38	Skills for Life manual handling/ health and safety, key skills
Blackwater Training	28	Skills for Life manual handling/ health and safety
Progress to Work	129	Employment services
Essex Adult Community Learning	9	Skills for work
London Action Trust	17	Unpaid work
Computer Gym	16	Skills for Life

In addition to these listed organisations, Essex Probation works with 17 other providers for a range of vocational, Skills for Life, resettlement and personal development courses.

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

Overall effectiveness, including capacity to improve

The well-developed information advice and guidance service was staffed by skilled officers who successfully helped offenders improve their employment prospects. The process for initial assessment of offenders' needs was insufficiently thorough.

The range of provision was good. Very effective working relationships with a wide range of providers supported development of flexible provision across a large county. Some good opportunities enabled offenders gain accreditation of work skills in their community payback schemes, but most offenders' skills were insufficiently recognised. Offender managers had little understanding of the range and type of education, training and employment provision provided by Essex Probation.

Offenders' achievements were good; they developed good work skills. In some areas, too few offenders referred to education, training and employment activities successfully completed courses. Particularly innovative strategies had improved courses for persistent offenders. The management restructure had raised the strategic profile of education, training and employment. The provision had improved since the last inspection in 2007 but quality assurance systems remained underdeveloped. The overall self-assessment process was insufficient to be an effective tool for continued improvement.

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

- Promote offender managers' improved understanding about the purpose of education, training and employment interventions, by introducing a process to provide clear and up-to-date information on the range of activities and projects taking place within the area and ensuring that offender managers receive information on the skills offenders are developing and the progress they are making.
- Raise expectations about the quality of the learning experience by increasing the number of offenders that progress onto education, training and employment interventions and accurately recording the skills developed by offenders on non-accredited unpaid work.
- Develop and implement an overall quality system and self-assessment process for learning and skills to improve the rigour of quality assurance processes in learning and skills.

Offender perspective - learning and employability as confirmed by inspectors.

A total of 44 offenders were interviewed as part of the inspection process, individually or in groups. Offenders appreciated the flexible provision and being able to receive prompt information and guidance. They felt that they were treated with respect and valued the support they received from staff. Most offenders valued the opportunity to improve their literacy and numeracy and could recognise how this improved their lives. Offenders could recall their induction and found the information they received valuable, particularly how they could use 20% of unpaid work for learning. Offenders on unpaid work found tasks well planned and structured, took pride in their work and could recognise the benefit to the community. Offenders in approved premises appreciated the help and support education, training and employment workers gave them to improve their employability. Most offenders did not discuss their learning with their offender manager. Many offenders said that attending learning and skills had given them another chance to change their lives and catch up with learning.

Main inspection report

The quality of provision

Grade: satisfactory

Assessment and sentence planning

Information, advice and guidance services were well developed and advisers had a good understanding of client needs. Access to information advice and guidance for employed and unemployed offenders was good. This had been maintained and improved since the previous inspection. Referrals to services were prompt and made by experienced and well-qualified education, training and employment officers who were encouraged to achieve a level 4 qualification. These skilled officers effectively

identified and helped meet offenders' needs. Their good local knowledge and well-developed links with employers and training providers was effectively used to help offenders improve their employment prospects. Essex Probation provided information advice and guidance under sub contract with nextstep. It was meeting its targets for information advice and guidance referrals, but attendance rates varied for first time referrals to the sessions.

Essex Probation had developed good working relationships with a wide range of providers and their external partners. Good use of a variety of externally funded agencies included private training providers, colleges and charitable organisations. Essex Probation's close links with many of its charitable partners helped extend the provision for offenders. For example, a member of the probation staff had been seconded to work with the Prince's Trust to help better utilise their available support to offenders. Essex Probation worked well with its external partners in developing a range of flexible provision across a large county. This was recognised at the previous inspection and had been further developed.

Offender managers and education, training and employment staff had a good working relationship, but offender managers were not sufficiently clear about the range of provision available within Essex Probation. Informal links were in place to provide information about education, training and employment interventions, but most offender managers had little understanding of the range of work skills that offenders developed on unpaid work projects and did not use this type of information to inform reviews with offenders. A heavy reliance was placed on informal links to ensure that offender managers had up to date information about interventions for offenders' reviews.

The assessment of offenders' literacy, numeracy and language needs was insufficiently thorough. Offenders completed the First Move initial screening tool at pre-sentence report stage or shortly after sentencing. This information was provided to the information, advice and guidance worker and used to develop any education, training and employment requirements to meet the offenders' needs. The assessment was self scored and not sufficiently thorough to identify all offenders' needs. Colleges and other specialist agencies who offered literacy, numeracy and language classes carried out a more detailed diagnostic assessment for offenders. However, this only occurred where offenders were referred to an education, training and employment activity. Routine assessment of literacy, numeracy and language did not take place.

Implementation of interventions

Essex Probation provided a good range of flexible education, training and employment activities and unpaid work placements. Pre-placement work sessions were effective in preparing offenders for unpaid work. Clear information was provided on the range of placements and skills that could be gained and offenders were matched to the available provision. A range of short, accredited courses were available to improve offenders employability such as the construction site certification

scheme, fork lift truck driving and health and safety courses aimed at self-employment. Provision was available throughout the county to provide help and support with CV building, job applications and how to deal with disclosure. Provision was flexible and available in the evening and weekends. However, in some areas within the county insufficient provision for offenders requiring pre-entry literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) was available. Essex Probation was aware of this and looking at ways to extend the provision. Teaching and coaching overall were satisfactory, and good in literacy and numeracy, where a range of strategies motivated offenders well. Individual learning plans were used well in literacy and numeracy.

Learning and skills linked well in some unpaid work areas. Essex Probation worked effectively with London Action Trust and the British Trust of Conservation Volunteers to provide recognition for offenders' skills, developed during unpaid work, by a formal qualification. The qualification clearly identifies transferable skills that can be demonstrated to an employer, further enhancing the employability of an offender.

Some unpaid work projects provided insufficient recognition of work skills. Unpaid work was well managed and supervisors acted as good role models. However, although offenders built a good range of practical and personal skills, their work skills were not sufficiently recognised on non-accredited unpaid work. Newly developed work skills were not sufficiently recorded and offenders failed to recognise how these skills could enhance their employment prospects.

Education, training and employment were inappropriately used as a specified activity and not used by Essex Probation to support the skills development of offenders effectively. Often the activity specified bore no relationship to the needs of the offender and was not determined at the beginning of the sentence. Little was carried out in terms of assessment of the offender's needs and how the activity would be of benefit.

Achieving and sustaining outcomes

Grade: good

Offenders developed good work skills on unpaid work projects such as team working, taking instructions and problem solving. Many were extremely proud of their achievements. Offenders had good opportunities to develop new practical skills that helped increase their confidence and communication skills. They could clearly recognise the benefits of their work to the community, which improved their self-esteem.

Achievements were good on most courses. On most literacy and numeracy course pass rates were high. Most offenders who completed the course achieved their qualification. Achievements on most courses in literacy and numeracy were above 90%. Most offenders working towards an accredited qualification improved by one level or more. Most offenders completing short courses, such as forklift truck driving and the construction site certification scheme test were successful. On unpaid work

accredited programmes offenders were progressing well. Most of them completed their course and achieved their qualification. On courses specifically targeting persistent offenders most offenders successfully completed their course.

The uptake of learning and skills activities in some areas was low. The number of offenders referred into learning and skills activities that subsequently started and completed the activities was overall satisfactory, but in some areas of the county, it was low. In some cases, the sequencing of other interventions prevented offenders starting courses. Essex Probation recognised this and plans were in place to improve the overall sequencing of interventions.

Leadership and management

Grade: satisfactory

Essex Probation had a good strategy to raise the profile of education, training and employment by restructuring its management team to improve the overall strategic management of the provision. The operational responsibility for education, training and employment rested with an interventions manager who was part of the overall interventions team. Clear lines of accountability, from an operational level through to senior managers, supported the raised profile of education, training and employment. The new structure showed early indications that staff understanding of its function was improving.

Essex Probation's implementation of strategies to support persistent offenders was good. The Bridge Project delivered, through partnership, by the Foundation Training Company, provided a very effective intensive programme aimed at supporting persistent offenders who otherwise may have received a custodial sentence. The programme offered accredited courses in Skills for Life, employability training and opportunities for personal development and social integration. Experienced staff supported learners very well. Learners stated that the programme had a positive impact on their life. Very effective use was made of SOVA and NACRO volunteers as mentors. One offender was training to be a mentor to other offenders. The length and timing of the programme was planned, allowing other programmes to be scheduled, to the individual's needs.

Essex Probation's quality assurance of learning and skills were underdeveloped. Procedures to ensure the quality of the overall learning and skills provision were underdeveloped. Quality improvement relied mainly on the quality assurance of each of the respective partners but there was no analysis of their findings to give a complete picture. Data collected by each provider was available but was not being used as a tool to judge the overall quality of provision. Analysis of data linked to the performance of each probation office was available and used effectively to ensure that Essex Probation was meeting key targets. However, this was not sufficiently linked to systems to ensure the quality of the offenders' experience. The self-assessment process was not sufficiently formalised to be effectively used as a tool to drive continuous improvement

Equality and diversity were satisfactory, as were safeguarding arrangements to support offenders as vulnerable adults. Working relationships between staff and offenders were good and reflected a high level of mutual respect. Staff provided good role models for offenders. Standards of behaviour were good and staff challenged inappropriate behaviour. Offenders had access to provision across the county and Essex Probation provided help with travel where required. Most providers gave specialist support for offenders with additional learning needs. Satisfactory support was in place for women offenders and good levels of support were available for persistent offenders. Essex Probation had a single equalities scheme in place, which was regularly monitored. Some analysis was taking place of the performance by different groups but this was not sufficiently used. The provision of pre-entry literacy numeracy and ESOL was insufficient in some areas. Suitable training was in place for the protection of vulnerable adults and Essex Probation carried out regular checks with their providers to ensure that their responsibilities and duty of care were being maintained.

Information about the inspection

1. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the Essex Probation Area Director of Interventions, acting as co-ordinator, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of provider's most recent position statement and development plans, comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding bodies, previous inspection reports and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
2. Inspectors use a range of methods to gather the views of learners including group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had completed on behalf of Essex Probation. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subjects the provider offers.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It rates council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this report in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 08456 404040, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

© Crown copyright 2009