

Thames Valley 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 2009 (*Common Inspection Framework* 2009) and contribute to the inspection frameworks of Her Majesty's Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation.

Information about the probation area

Thames Valley Probation Area (TVP) was created in 2001 and is an amalgamation of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire probation areas. The TVP has a combined population of two million people. The area is diverse with areas of affluence and deprivation. Local employment includes agriculture, tourism, light engineering and information technology. The minority ethnic population for the area varies considerably from 36% in Slough to 2% in West Oxfordshire. The number of offenders from minority ethnic groups represents approximately 20% of TVP's caseload. Approximately 13% of offenders are women. Around 50% of offenders were unemployed at the time of sentence. The Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) provider is Milton Keynes College who works on site in each of TVP's local delivery units. Most information, advice and guidance is delivered by specialist staff employed by the probation service with some provided by nextstep and a range of other specialist external agencies.

TVP works from 12 main office locations, employing 800 staff who manage approximately 8000 offenders serving sentences in the community and supervise around 1500 offenders released from prison. Offenders under TVP's supervision carry out over 300,000 hours of unpaid work in the community every year, serving 12 magistrates courts and three crown courts. Six approved premises and six prisons, HMYOI Aylesbury, HMP Grendon, HMP & YOI Reading, HMP Springhill and HMP Woodhill are located in the area. TVP produces more than 8,500 reports a year for the courts it serves and has an annual budget of £26,000,000.

TVP was awarded trust status in April 2010. The last inspection under OMI 1 took place in July 2007. The current OLASS contract ends in July 2010.

Information about the offender learning and employability principal providers:

Lead OLASS providers and their subcontractors	Number of learners on discrete provision	Types of provision
Milton Keynes College	147	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational courses
Oxford and Cherwell Valley College	Variable	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational courses
Newbury College	Variable	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational courses
New Direction	Variable	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational courses
East Berks College	Variable	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational

		courses
Bracknell College	Variable	Skills for Life and a variety of vocational courses
Other providers	Number of learners	Type of provision
nextstep	192	Information, advice and guidance
Scout enterprises	Variable	Employment training/support
SOVA	29	Employment training and mentoring
DWP	38	Employability training
Progress to work	Variable	Information, advice and guidance
Warwickshire College	Variable	Variety of course
Best Training	Variable	IT courses
Business Link	Variable	Self-employment
Aim Higher	Variable	Further and higher education support
SERCO	Variable	Access to employment
Princes Trust	Variable	Employment training
Rethink	Variable	Support with mental health
A4E	Variable	Employment 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 good
Capacity to improve	Grade good
	Grade descriptor
Quality of provision	good
Assessment and sentence planning	
Implementation of interventions	
Achieving and sustaining outcomes	good
Leadership and management	good
Equality and diversity	good
Safeguarding	satisfactory

Overall effectiveness, including capacity to improve

TVP provided a good information, advice and guidance service with good access for all offenders. Assessment of offenders' needs was detailed and thorough. The use of education, training and employment interventions as an order of the court was good. Link advisors, offender managers and tutors had very effective working links. Targets set for offenders in individual learning plans were insufficiently detailed and the recording of offenders' progress was weak.

TVP had developed unpaid work projects to provide a good range of opportunities for offenders to develop good work skills, however recording of skills development was not taking place. Unpaid work was well planned. Support for vulnerable offenders was good. Good use was made of mentors and good links were in place with a varied range of external agencies. The range of education, training and employment provision and the level of support for offenders in approved premises were good.

Offenders' achievement on courses was good and most developed good work skills. The strategic development of learning and skills very effectively provided an inclusive range of provision. TVP had made good progress in addressing areas for improvement from the last inspection and maintaining and developing strengths. Comprehensive quality assurance systems had been developed since the last inspection; however, recent changes to the management of quality improvement had not yet been sufficiently embedded and needed further development. The self-assessment process was well developed, and provided an accurate picture of the

overall provision. Data and feedback from offenders were used well to inform the report.

What does Thames Valley Probation area need to do to improve further?

- Introduce a system to better record personal and employability skills developed by offenders to enable offenders to provide evidence to employers of the skills they develop on unpaid work.
- Continue to introduce and develop information technology to improve and support offenders' opportunities to engage in learning activities.
- Implement and continue to develop the new quality assurance procedures to ensure that quality improvement and the self-assessment process continue to improve the provision of learning and skills throughout TVP.
- Better link action planning and target setting in individual learning plans to personal skills development.

Offender perspective - learning and employability as confirmed by inspectors.

A total of 68 offenders were seen and spoken to as part of the inspection process, individually or in groups. Offenders valued the opportunity to be able to access training that they had not previously considered. Opportunities for individual learning were much appreciated by offenders. Increased confidence through learning was found by many offenders to reduce their frustrations and reduce their anger. Offenders found staff friendly and fair. They felt that they were treated with respect and they valued the support they received. Offenders on unpaid work took pride in their work and could recognise the benefit to the community. Offenders were frustrated by the lack of access to computers and some wanted better planning of transport to reach unpaid work sites. Offenders felt they would benefit from more contact with their offender manager.

Main inspection report

The quality of provision

Grade: good

Assessment and sentence planning

Very effective links were in place between education, training and employment link advisors, offender managers and tutors. Information was shared well both formally and informally. A strong focus on bringing together the relevant expertise of each party ensured that offenders received the best intervention at the most appropriate time. Offender managers were clear about the referral process and received good information on the progress offenders were making. However, some said they would like a better understanding of the education, training and employment provision.

Offenders in the TVP had good access to a quality information, advice and guidance service. Information, advice and guidance were available to all offenders whether employed or unemployed, with flexible provision to accommodate employed offenders. Information, advice and guidance were timely and could be accessed throughout the sentence. Staff were well qualified and skilled at working with offenders. A thorough and detailed assessment of individual needs took place. Link advisors effectively gave offenders the confidence to talk freely about potential barriers to learning. Link advisors had good local knowledge which they used well in guiding offenders to employment opportunities. Link advisors skilfully used a variety of external agencies to help individually tailor support and provision to meet individual offenders' needs. A high level of support was provided for offenders with low self-esteem and insufficient confidence to access provision away from TVP's sites. Frequently arrangements were made for offenders to be seen at probation offices or for advisors to accompany offenders to off-site appointments.

Good use was made of education, training and employment. Clear guidance was in place to help offender managers make the most appropriate use of education, training and employment as part of the court's sentence. Offender managers were clear about activities offenders would engage with, and the offenders who would benefit from this type of order. Offenders with education, training and employment as a specified activity engaged intensively with education, training and employment workers to produce an individually tailored action plan to address specific needs.

Action planning and the recording of individual learning and skills development were insufficient to motivate offenders and inform the planning of learning. Individual learning plans were insufficiently individualised and were not sufficiently well used to plan learning. Action plan targets were not sufficiently focused on what an offender needed to do to progress. Personal skills offenders developed on courses and on unpaid work such as working with others, taking instruction and improved communication, were insufficiently recorded. Other than Unpaid Work certificates of 'Work Readiness' offenders had little evidence of the wider skills they had developed and how they could be used to improve their employability.

Implementation of interventions

Very effective learning support was in place for vulnerable offenders. Interventions were tailored to meet the needs of offenders with a range of diverse needs. Specialist advisors skilfully assessed the support needs of offenders with multiple barriers to learning such as mental illness, drug addiction, or the type of offence. A high level of individual support was in place particularly for offenders who were unable to access group learning. A strong focus was on providing support for offenders to develop their personal skills and confidence to take part in group activities. In exceptional cases offenders were allowed to complete a course at a probation office after the probation order had been completed. The sequencing of interventions was planned well to ensure that offenders attended interventions in the most appropriate way to maximise the benefit from each activity.

Good use was made of mentors to support offenders. A partnership between the OLASS provider and SOVA was well developed and offered throughout Thames Valley Probation. Training for mentors was good and well established links were in place with the OLASS provider and probation staff. Individual and group support was provided for offenders to help develop their literacy and numeracy skills. Mentors supported offenders in accessing education or vocational courses and in seeking employment. Mentors worked well with offenders to develop their confidence and self-esteem. Very effective partnership working with external agencies provided a range of different support options to help enhance the quality of interventions.

The planning, range and development of unpaid work projects was good. Unpaid work accommodated offenders' needs well. Over the last year Thames Valley Probation had successfully increased the number of places where individual offenders could work supervised by an employer. TVP had a strong focus on developing unpaid work projects of value to the community which enabled offenders to develop skills. The Thames Valley Probation (TVP) flexible approach to unpaid work successfully accommodated offenders' wider needs. TVP helped with child care and provided unpaid work for the 50% of offenders with regular employment. Community projects were well publicised, with a strong focus on improving community cohesion. Offenders took pride in improving their communities. The development of work opportunities was based on providing equal access to quality work irrespective of whether the work was single placement or group work. The utilisation of 20% of the unpaid work hours for education, training and employment effectively developed work skills for work ready offenders. However, not all offenders on unpaid work were aware of the 20% rule. The pre-placement work session that offenders attended prior to starting unpaid work was well structured and provided valuable information. However, insufficient focus was placed on promoting education, training and employment interventions.

The provision for education, training and employment in approved premises was well planned and very effectively met offenders' individual needs. Operations managers had planned and developed a particularly good range of relevant and appropriate

projects which successfully engaged offenders in learning, skills development, employment, and independent living and coping skills. A range of voluntary agencies delivered an annual programme of specific funded projects that had been carefully planned to meet the offenders' particular individual and learning needs. OLASS mentors worked well with offenders to offer appropriate advice and guidance and deliver specific personal and skills development, for example, cookery classes. Key workers worked particularly well with offenders to help them access advice and guidance, and appropriate programmes to support their rehabilitation. They worked well with offenders to make sure that the access and transition points to the different activities were planned and understood.

Teaching and learning were at least satisfactory with some good and outstanding teaching. The planning of group sessions was mainly good with tutors maximising the learning opportunities for offenders. In the better sessions a wide range of activities were in place to help engage offenders. Standards of behaviour were generally good. Offenders were punctual and classes started on time. Resources to support learning were satisfactory overall with some good classroom accommodation. However, insufficient use was made of information learning technology to support and enhance learning. Many offenders were insufficiently skilled in using computers. On some course insufficient computers were available for offenders.

Achieving and sustaining outcomes

Grade: good

Offenders developed a good range of skills to help improve their employment prospects. On unpaid work offenders developed a good work ethic and wider skills such as taking instruction, problem solving, working as team and improved communication. Offenders on courses could recognise their increased confidence through improving literacy and numeracy skills. Many improved their confidence and motivation to progress into full-time college provision. Some offenders could clearly see how improving their literacy skills had reduced their frustration with tasks such as form filling and job applications. Offenders who initially could only receive learning sessions on an individual basis could see how their confidence had improved sufficiently well to take part in group sessions.

Offenders' achievements were good. Achievement on accredited course had steadily improved since the previous inspection. Most offenders who remained to the end of literacy and numeracy course successfully achieved their qualification. The number of offenders who started courses after referral had improved. Most offenders who accessed short accredited courses achieved their qualification. Offenders with an education, training and employment intervention as part of their sentence, progressed well into employment with around 21% achieving sustainable employment and 80% accessing training or employment courses.

Leadership and management

Grade: good

Thames Valley Probation had good strategic planning with a clear understanding of learning and skills within the probation context. Managers had a strong focus on improving the provision and providing a high quality service for offenders. Senior managers had a clear understanding of the impact of imminent changes to the funding of offender learning in the community. Planning had taken place to provide alternative funding to maintain provision for offenders. A strategic group, Thames Valley Offender Skills and Employment Partnership, had been established, bringing together a range of partners to develop ways to provide provision for offenders including those unable to attend main stream providers.

Multi-agency and partnership working was good. Thames Valley Probation had developed strong and productive working relationships with partners. The OLASS provider worked closely with the TVP to develop the correct provision to meet offenders' needs. Thames Valley Probation had facilitated meetings with a wide range of external agencies to extend and develop the provision. The multi-agency approach helped support offenders into education, training and employment interventions. Communication between different referral agencies was good with referral between agencies. Good opportunities were in place for different agencies to share good practice and work together on projects.

The promotion of equality and diversity was good and safeguarding arrangements to support offenders as vulnerable adults were satisfactory. A strong focus on developing and providing an inclusive provision was meeting the wider needs of offenders. Thames Valley Probation had worked with the OLASS provider very effectively to utilise funding for provision suited to offenders unable to access main stream provision, successfully providing provision for those otherwise unlikely to access training. Minority ethnic offenders were well integrated into groups. Standards of behaviour were good and a high level of mutual respect was in place between offenders, tutors, supervisors and link advisors. Offenders felt safe and appropriate attention was paid to health and safety. Both probation and provider staff received ongoing training for the treatment of vulnerable offenders. Well understood policies and systems were in place for safeguarding. Offender feedback effectively helped plan and improve the overall provision. Specialist provision was in place to support prolific and persistent offenders and a centre to help support women offenders had recently opened. Offenders with additional learning needs received sufficient support to achieve their chosen qualification. Overall data were used well to identify under-represented groups participating in learning and skills. However, data were not analysed sufficiently to identify the progress and performance of different groups of offenders.

The new quality assurance systems introduced in the recent management restructure were insufficiently clear to staff. TVP recognised that a need remained for quality assurance of the provision as a whole to be maintained. However, systems introduced to support the new structure were insufficiently developed and it was too early to judge their impact. TVP's self-assessment process was well developed and brought together all aspects of the provision to provide a clear overall picture. Data were being used well to inform planning and ensure that progress was being made by offenders.

Information about the inspection

1. Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the Thames Valley Probation Area's Director of Interventions as co-ordinator, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment reports and development plans, , previous inspection reports and data on offenders and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
2. Inspectors use a range of methods to gather the views of offenders including group and individual interviews. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from a range of programmes.

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