

Reading Strategies and Prison Libraries: Examining the Implications of the Ofsted & HMIP Reports for Library Services in English Prisons (Summary of Research)

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS & APPROACH

In the wake of the impact of COVID-19, Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons conducted a prison education review with a focus on reading in 2022 and a follow-up report in 2023. The reports asserted that reading education was poorly organised and under-prioritised by prison regimes and put forth a list of recommendations, including the implementation of an effective Reading Strategy in every prison, increasing prisoners' access to books and prison libraries, and developing initiatives to promote reading throughout the prison.

This small-scale study aimed to find out more about reading education in prisons and what has taken place to implement the reports' recommendations, particularly in relation to prison library provision. Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions of two groups: prison library staff and people who work in voluntary sector organisations¹ that support reading in prisons across the country. Analysis of the interview data uncovered five themes that provide insight into the current state of efforts by some key stakeholders to increase reading in prisons in England. Findings speak only to a subset of institutions represented in the study and are not representative of the whole prison estate. Nevertheless, they offer useful insights into the success and challenges of implementing report recommendations.

FINDINGS

1. Ofsted/HMIP Report Implementation Efforts

The findings concerning efforts to implement report recommendations pointed to four main areas of focus: *Reading Strategies*, *Embedded Reading*, *New Positions*, and *Library Access*. Though participants reported that the effectiveness of the Reading Strategies in their prisons varied, all of them do have a Reading Strategy and their creation alone has had some effect in bringing the importance of reading to light in those prisons. Similarly, all of them reported attempts to embed reading throughout the establishment – placing books in workshops, classrooms and on the wings. All of the prisons had added new roles and positions to their organisations (although these were frequently vacant and at times perceived to be less effective than they might be). Attempts to increase prisoners' library access have been more elusive. While there were some examples of Governors drastically increasing the prioritisation of library access and allocating dedicated library officers or making it more difficult for staff to reassign library officers to other jobs, significant barriers remain in many prisons. This lack of consistency in access is problematic because, unlike other areas of implementation, prisoner access to a library is mandated by UK law². Findings

¹ This included participants from the National Literacy Trust, Prison Reading Groups/Give a Book, the Reading Agency and Shannon Trust.

revealed several complicated and intertwined barriers, often relating to staffing shortages and staff attitudes towards the library, that prevent the increase in access recommended in the Ofsted/HMIP Reports.

2. Raised Profile of Reading & Libraries

Findings indicate that the Ofsted/HMIP Reports and Reading Strategies have raised the profile of reading, increased advocacy opportunities for libraries, and led to increased prioritisation from senior management in prisons. Most participants also believe that the support has not filtered down to all members of staff including, importantly, the officers working directly with the prisoners, whose attitudes can have a significant impact on accessibility and prisoner understanding of the library. These findings suggest that consideration must be given to finding ways to extend the focus on reading to every level in prisons, including the prisoners themselves. Unfortunately, it seems that what was reported in the Ofsted/HMIP follow-up report, that “most prisoners were unaware of the reading strategy or the opportunities to improve their reading”³, remains largely the case today.

3. Underutilisation of Libraries / Librarians

Prison libraries are an already-existing, mission-aligning, professionally staffed, capable and ready reading-support resource, but several factors prevent them from being fully utilised. The data relating to their underutilisation fell into two categories: misunderstandings about libraries and disempowerment. Though extensive research has established the multifaceted benefits and value of prison libraries and the importance of reading for pleasure and informal learning spaces for prisoners⁴, people outside of LIS circles, including all levels of prison management and staff, are often unaware of these benefits and exactly what libraries and library staff have to offer. Secondly, prison library staff and voluntary sector workers reported, with frustration, several factors beyond their control within the prison workplace setting that can prevent them from doing their jobs and lead to feelings of powerlessness. These challenges are not new but the current situation and reading focus have created an opportunity to address some of them.

4. Need for increased collaboration

Though Reading Strategies have helped, the study identified two major roadblocks to fully achieving the increased collaboration recommended in the Ofsted/HMIP Reports. First, communication is poor. Barriers like out-of-date technology, staff turnover, and location-based challenges within the prison were identified as contributing factors, but many participants also expressed a bewilderment as to why things aren't better and suggested that things like a directory or more uniform system of communication or uniformity in roles across prisons might help. Second, despite shared goals and a focus on reading, stakeholders often work in siloed work environments, which have been shown to prevent organisations from achieving their goals⁵. Prison reading works best when the skills and

² The Prison Rules 1999, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/728/made>, and Ministry of Justice, *Prison Education & Library Services for adult prisons in England* (2019 - updated 2025) stipulate that prisoners should have weekly library access for a minimum of thirty minutes and be afforded the time with resources to prepare their defence.

³ Ofsted & HMIP. (2023). *The quality of reading education in prisons: one year on*. Recommendations and Progress Section.

⁴ Krolak, L. (2019). *Books beyond bars: The transformative potential of prison libraries*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning; Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2019). What is the role of the prison library? The development of a theoretical foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139; Downham, H. (2025). Prison libraries and their future potential in England and Wales. *Prison Service Journal*, (276), 34; Vogel, B. (2009). *The prison library primer: A program for the 21st century*. Scarecrow Press; Awofeso, O. A., & Opeanwo, O. A. (2024). The pivotal role of prison libraries as an information resource for prisoner rehabilitation: An integrative review of the literature. *International Journal of Information, Diversity and Inclusion*, 8(1), 61-82.

literacy training that prison education brings work in tandem with the reading for pleasure and informal learning that libraries offer but many participants felt that meaningful collaboration is currently out of reach. They also suggested that expanding collaborations to include a larger swath of stakeholders would help. A growing body of research has shown the power of using co-production in prisons and involving people with lived experience of incarceration, such as Shannon Trust mentors, in Reading Strategy meetings and decisions would lead to valuable insights and more effective services. As with any practice in a prison environment, there would be real challenges to such co-production efforts, but the benefits would be well worth the effort.

5. Inconsistencies in provision

A striking theme that was woven throughout interviews is the vast differences in the resources and services that are available to prisoners in different settings. In describing the situation in prisons across the country, people involved with working in several of them frequently employed phrases like “*varies massively from prison to prison*”, “*it’s a mixed bag*”, and “*it’s all a bit hit and miss*”. These discrepancies exist between prisons, between wings within a single prison, between staff members’ understanding of the library, and between what staff members play what roles to what effect in different prisons and they leave many prisoners underserved. After listing several of the programmes and resources offered by libraries to help prisoners improve their reading, the Ofsted/HMIP follow-up report noted with concern that “only a very small proportion of the prison population has benefited from such initiatives”⁶. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that this continues to be the case.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

The findings of this research align with existing research concerning several of the most pressing challenges that prison libraries face, strengthen arguments for the very things the Ofsted/HMIP Reports recommend, and add urgency to calls for their effective implementation. They also support and closely correspond with several of the recommendations put forward in Finlay and Neri’s recent report, particularly their calls to: Establish national standards for prison library provision; Integrate library awareness into prison officer training and development; Prioritise strategic ways of increasing access to prison library services; Strengthen cross-departmental communication and collaboration; and Commission a comprehensive review of prison library provision⁷. If implemented, these five recommendations would make a significant impact in addressing some of the issues identified in this research. The findings also reveal areas where further research is needed. While this study examined the perspectives of library and voluntary sector staff, the perspectives of education providers need to be explored to discover what can make library-education partnerships more effective and research that engages prison staff and prisoners themselves would be particularly valuable in learning how to adjust prison staff perceptions and in gauging the effectiveness of implementation efforts.

⁵ Moore, R. & Hamilton, P. (2016). ‘Silo Mentalities’ and their impact on service delivery in prison-community transitions: A case study of resettlement provision at male open prison. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 55(1), 111-130.

⁶ Ofsted & HMIP. (2023). *The quality of reading education in prisons: one year on*.

⁷ Finlay, J., & Neri, G. (2025). *Prison library provision in England and Wales: Findings from a national survey of prison library staff*, p. 31-33.