



## Political courage needed to boost prisons' rehabilitation role

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Prisons could do much more to increase public safety through rehabilitation if we could put aside a dysfunctional policy debate that puts government on the defensive and leaves practitioners and prisoners without a voice, according to a report published today (12 February) by the RSA.

*The Learning Prison*, the outcome of the RSA's Prison Learning Network, acknowledges that advances in prison learning and skills have been made in recent years but argues that further significant improvements require a "common sense" approach based on evidence and reason, not opinion.

It concludes that politicians need to be braver about treating prisons as a core public service requiring modernisation consistent with other areas. This includes: giving practitioners and prisoners a stronger voice and enabling them to drive innovation; raising aspiration for prisoner outcomes and increasing the use of ICT. Recommendations include:

***Transformation of the technological infrastructure of prisons*** that takes them from being behind the curve, to ahead of it. This should build prisons' capacity for learning through technology including:

- Standard security protocols;
- Giving prisoners access to up-to-date and industry-standard equipment;
- An e-learning framework for the whole estate;
- Allowing the private sector to test new technologies in prisons.

The report includes case studies showing the multiple benefits that technology can bring and contends that without transformation the digital exclusion of prisoners and speed of technological change will leave more ex-prisoners unemployable.

***A step change in ambition for increasing the number of ex-offenders securing work*** through:

- Local and national 'Second Chance' coalitions led by employers.
- Encouraging the public sector and those advocating on behalf of offenders to take the lead in

opening up recruitment to ex-offenders.

- A Second Chance Awards Accreditation scheme that would assess, recognise and promote initiatives aimed at increasing offender employment.

**Recognition of the role prisoner engagement** can play in delivering better public services through:

- A national review of prison councils commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council aimed at expanding user engagement in prisons. This should focus, in particular, on prisoners' involvement in designing and delivering learning, skills and work programmes.

**Increasing community engagement in prison learning** through:

- Using the approach already being pioneered in the RSA schools' area based curriculum to link learning in prison to the resources and opportunities available in the local community

**Strengthening the evidence base and scope for spreading best practice in the prisons system** through

- The report suggests a Centre for Rehabilitation and Crime Reduction to evaluate interventions based on solid evidence on outcomes. This would add an objective presence and attempt to take political heat out of the prisons debate.
- Government work with providers and prisons in adopting a sufficiently high level of evaluation, a common metric of cost and crimes prevented and in establishing ways of aggregating evidence locally, regionally and nationally.

Malcolm Grant, President and Provost, UCL who Chairs the Prison Learning Network said:

*"Impressive efforts that are going into prison education in often adverse conditions. Spending on prison education and training has risen in recent years to over £150 million in 2007/8. This is very welcome but is dwarfed by the staggering £11 billion that re-offending by ex-prisoners is estimated to cost us each year. At an important political moment, The Learning Prison argues for considerable political courage, leadership and inspiration."*

#### **Notes to Editors**

1. To arrange an interview with Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA or Malcolm Grant, Chair of the Prison Learning Network, please contact Nina Bolognesi on 07971851145 or email her on [nina.bolognesi@rsa.org.uk](mailto:nina.bolognesi@rsa.org.uk).
2. To speak to Rachel O'Brien, author of *The Learning Prison*, please ring 07801 106920 or email [racobrien@googlemail.com](mailto:racobrien@googlemail.com).

3. *The Learning Prison* aims to reflect the views and experiences of the people involved including the discussions we held with prisoners. The project was part funded by the Bowland Trust.
4. Download the report at <http://www.theRSA.org/thelearningprison>.