

# Speech: Matthew Coffey's speech to the Unlocked Graduates event, University of Suffolk

One of the things that most often surprises people about Ofsted is the breadth of our inspection work. Clearly we are most well known for our work in schools, and certainly that tends to get the most airtime. But our inspection activity touches on the full breadth of education, training and care services – from childminders to apprenticeship providers to adoption and fostering agencies. And of course we are also responsible for the inspection of education, skills and work activities that take place in prisons and young offender institutions throughout England.

That breadth of inspection activity gives us a bird's eye view of young people's experiences and journey to adulthood and beyond. And of course, much of the provision which we scrutinise is implicitly, if not explicitly, geared towards ensuring that the young people and adult learners they serve never come into contact with the criminal justice system. But for the minority who do, that bird's eye view allows us to look at how and why this is happening.

Recently my colleague Yvette Stanley, National Director for Social Care, published a [Joint Targeted Area Inspection on children living with neglect](#). Carried out in conjunction with the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, this survey particularly focused on the experiences of older children experiencing neglect.

The JTAI found that while much progress has been made in protecting younger children from neglect, older children are often overlooked. But in many ways it is the needs of these older children that are even more complex. Older neglected children often experience abuse outside the home as well as within it. Children escaping neglectful homes are more likely to be at risk of being drawn into criminal activity. As a result, sometimes older neglected children are seen as 'the problem'. The JTAI shows that front line services work together to tackle issues like youth violence and gang involvement, but often there is little consideration of the underlying causes that contribute to this behaviour, such as neglectful parenting.

None of that though is to excuse criminal behaviour among young people, the causes of which are many and complex. But the JTAI clearly shows that there is a clear link between tackling neglect and preventing criminality.

As with so many areas of public policy, prevention is better than cure. And nowhere is this truer than when it comes to crime. There will, however, always be those who do commit crimes. Our view at Ofsted is that we should take the same focused approach to what happens when someone enters prison, as we do from stopping them entering in the first place.

Prison is tough. It's meant to be. While some of the more sensational elements of the tabloid press might portray prison as a Butlin's for criminals, you will already know how far that is from the truth. Prisons serve to protect the public and punish those who have wronged our society. Custodial sentences also support the reduction of crime by acting as a deterrent, ensuring crime never pays.

However, none of that means that we should neglect the third, equally important, purpose of a prison: supporting the rehabilitation of offenders. And central to this purpose comes education, which can enable those who have committed crime and served their time to leave prison with new horizons exposed, able to find a better path. This isn't just good for the individual involved, it's good for all of society, reducing crime and conserving precious public funds.

To illustrate this, I would like us to consider the predicament of 'Joe'. Joe is facing a 12-month custodial sentence for domestic burglary. Sadly, his path to this point is an all too familiar one. Neglected at a young age by his parents, the care system did not deliver the stability Joe needed. The upheaval and disturbance of his upbringing soon led Joe to turn to habitual drug use and petty crime. Expulsion from a number of schools followed and Joe quickly became disillusioned and dropped out. Without any qualifications, training or support Joe couldn't access meaningful work and is denied the opportunity of a career.

Now, as an adult, Joe has a serious conviction and is joining the 57% of people entering prison with literacy skills no better than the average 11 year-old. At each stage of Joe's journey the education and care services haven't delivered for him. That is not to say this is the fault of individual services – the problems here are complex and manifold. As our neglect JTAI said, more needs to be done to support neglected young people, and we all know that we need to do better at engaging young people who have become disillusioned with their school education, through proper apprenticeship and FE provision. But in Joe's case, we are where we are. A sad but all too familiar scenario. The question is what is next?

Statistically the most likely outcome is that Joe will join the approximately 60% of prisoners who, having served a sentence of less than 12 months, end up re-offending. His experience of prison is, I am sorry to say, likely to be devoid of any genuine opportunity to turn his life around, denying him the opportunity of a reasonable chance of positive resettlement following his sentence. Overcrowded and understaffed conditions are likely to mean Joe spends long periods locked up in his cell, without sufficient encouragement or incentive to engage with the limited education that is offered. What is offered are generally low level qualifications that aren't held in high regard by employers. There is also limited support for Joe to tackle his drugs habit. At the end of it all, Joe ends up joining what the [Coates' review](#) found to be the three-fifths of prisoners leaving without an identified employment or education or training outcome. What follows seems inevitable. Joe is unable to secure meaningful, paid work and – the influences, the temptation, the allure of drugs – restart the downward spiral into crime.

Now, let us consider an alternative, very different, path for 'Joe'. A different prison, one that, as well as delivering the punishment Joe deserves, is able to prioritise the rehabilitation of its prisoners. The leadership and management of the prison set clear priorities for learning, skills and work and establish partnerships with employers to offer realistic work activities to prisoners. There is a commitment and belief among staff throughout the prison and their training partners, that giving every prisoner a second chance is the right thing to do. Education and training is tied with prisoners' rewards and incentives. It is delivered with the enthusiasm and expertise needed to successfully develop prisoners' employability skills. Work activities challenge and inspire prisoners, keeping them busy for the whole of the working day. Proper support is given to tackle addiction and drug use.

The impact on Joe's prospects is significant. Prison officers build upon his interest in mechanics and encourage him to undertake a bike mechanic training scheme. Former prisoners who have completed the scheme and gone on to secure jobs upon release, inspire Joe that there is an alternative to crime that is both realistic and more appealing. Instead of compounding his difficulties, prison has thrown Joe a lifeline to lead a law-abiding and useful life outside. It's quite a turnaround for him and his family.

The cost of failure in 'Joe's' first scenario, not only to Joe, but society as a whole is massive. First of all there is the human cost resulting from this cycle of re-offending, the revolving door, in and out of prison. Crime blights society and undermines community cohesion. The impact on victims is well documented, particularly those who have been subject to the most serious crimes, going far beyond any resulting physical harm or financial loss. Post-traumatic stress, anger, fear, anxiety, depression will be familiar emotions to anyone who has been a victim of crime. But the impact of crime goes beyond immediate victims, it undermines trust and corrodes civil society.

For the perpetrators of crime, each fresh conviction brings a heavier custodial sentence and a further spiral into more serious criminality. Our prisons then struggle to cope with the number of prisoners and their entrenched violent behaviour. Prisons become ever more challenging environments in which to establish effective education, and the prospect of rehabilitation for prisoners and a return to law-abiding society becomes even more remote.

The economic costs of re-offending are just as significant. Incarceration does not come cheap. The [Prison Reform Trust](#) has reported that the average overall cost of a prison place is as much as £35,000 per year. Incidentally, about the same as it costs to spend one year at Eton. Multiplied by the approximately 83,000 people currently in prison and the bill comes to somewhere near £3 billion annually. In 2007-08, the NAO estimated that re-offending by all recent ex-prisoners cost the economy between £9.5 billion and £13 billion – a figure that has been much quoted since – and as much as three quarters of this cost can be attributed to former short-sentence prisoners. More recent estimates suggest this may be as much as £15 billion every year, which analysis by Unlocked Graduates estimates as being just under £600,000 per re-offender. If this estimate is correct, and many would

suggest it is on the conservative side, it means that we could realise a potential saving of at least £1 billion per year if just 1,800 fewer prisoners re-offended. Yet we already know that former prisoners are 9 percentage points less likely to re-offend if they are in work, so giving prisoners access to the education and skills that will provide that opportunity of future employment seems a complete no brainer.

The question we then have to ask ourselves, and the purpose of Ofsted inspections, is to establish – how good are prisons at delivering the education, skills and work activities, which are so vital and will push ‘Joe’ into scenario two? The answer is – by no means good enough. In the 6 month period September to February this year, 12 of the 20 prisons we inspected were judged either requiring improvement or inadequate. None received the top outstanding judgement. This is sadly typical. The overall proportion of prisons and young offender institutions judged good or outstanding for overall effectiveness at their most recent inspection stood at just 46%. If these figures related to schools, it would cause a national outcry. Yet the truth is that stories of poor rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners do not sell newspapers or make for appealing packages on the six and ten o’clock news. This lack of engagement, combined with an overly punitive attitude by some, means the public interest in improving the quality of education in our prisons is lacking.

In too many prisons, the education, skills and work offered does not meet the prisoners’ needs for life outside of the prison. Of particular concern is a lack of thought in tailoring the courses that are offered with the labour and economic needs of the geographical areas where prisoners will be released. In the vast majority of our inspections, we find much of the vocational training and employment provision delivered by the prisons themselves insufficient; run by instructors with very limited knowledge and skills in training, which is then reflected in poor quality learning and development for prisoners. Qualifications also tend to be at too low a level, and below what employers would expect. And the development of English and maths skills within work based training often falls short. Work is often mundane and does not develop the employability skills, such as attention to detail and productivity, which can really enhance prisoners’ chances of positive rehabilitation on release. In short, too much education, training and work in prisons is poor. Despite catering for some of the people most in need of a fresh start, in a place where the stakes are so high, education in prisons is failing to deliver. We all pay the price of that.

Is there any good news, or hope for the future? Well, in recent years we have seen promising signs that those in power have woken up to the need to transform our prison service. In his 2016 speech at the Policy Exchange on prison reform, David Cameron rightly stated that we shouldn’t see prisoners as ‘simply liabilities to be managed, but instead as potential assets to be harnessed’. With the enormous cost of re-offending, the very real experience of recent unrest and the difficulty in recruiting and retaining prison officers, politicians have recognised that simply locking more people up and leaving them to serve a sentence is simply not sustainable.

Three months after [David Cameron’s Policy Exchange speech](#), [Dame Sally Coates’](#)

[review of education in prison was published](#). The report described education as one of the 'pillars of effective rehabilitation' and called for learning to be placed 'at the heart' of the prison system. Sally was absolutely right. Education not only improves prisoners' lives, but also has a multiplier effect through the benefits it brings to society as a whole.

Since the Coates' review we've had a White Paper and the Prisons and Courts Bill that promised to take forward a number of the review's recommendations, further demonstrating the government's commitment to prison reform. We are also seeing progress with making governors more accountable for the performance of their prisons. In a speech I gave at Wormwood Scrubs in 2013, I highlighted the need for governors to be fully accountable for the provision of training and education in prisons. Too often there can be a sense of senior authorities washing their hands of responsibility. Our inspectors witness contractors delivering prisoners poor quality education and training, and then seldom being properly held to account for it. The 6 initial reform prisons that have given their governors greater autonomy over how services are commissioned has been a welcome step in the right direction. Accountability has also sharpened with the shift towards a common performance framework for private and public sector prisons, with more meaningful performance measures that include a focus on preparing prisoners for life after release.

So with these reforms, the seeming political will and the slam dunk case for reforming how we run our prisons, we are left asking why isn't further progress being made? Why are more than half of our prisons delivering an unacceptable level of education, training and work activities? Is this a case of politicians and others paying lip service without translating it into action?

Again, I think this comes back to public interest and opinion. The political reality is that the welfare of prisoners doesn't feature particularly highly on the doorstep. In a 2011 poll, two-thirds of those polled thought the best solution to re-offending rates was 'to make prison life harder' as a deterrent to committing further crimes. Six out of 10 interviewees agreed that rehabilitation was a 'soft option that tries to make excuses for offenders'. Real political leadership then is needed to actively make the case to the public as to why good education and training in prisons, and real rehabilitation, benefits everyone.

It's also fair to say, that despite the recent blitz of activity, these reforms are too modest when set against the problems facing our overcrowded and under-resourced prison system. Surrounded by a climate of increasing violence and availability of drugs, prison leaders and managers have found it, and continue to find it, difficult to prioritise the delivery of education, skills and work activities. It's hard to see education and training as a fundamental part of the job, when so much time is taken up firefighting serious incidents. That means inexperienced managers are left in charge without robust knowledge of what good education looks like. This in turn leaves them unable to work out how to improve.

Prisoner attendance at activities also remains a problem. Staff shortages

have meant that too often the few prison staff that are available are not able to take prisoners to classes or activities. Activity spaces either remain underutilised or what is offered is simply reduced. This is, I am afraid to say, a scandalous waste of resource.

Finally, the link between prisoners' sentence planning and their initial assessment on arrival at the prison is often weak. This makes it difficult to tailor the impact of the careers' information, advice and guidance that prisoners receive during their sentence. Unfortunately, this has only worsened since April when the national contract for the careers' service came to an end. Prisons are struggling to find a way to replace it.

Driving forward the quality of prison education, skills and work in prison is vital if we are to make any sort of dent in our country's high re-offending rates, and the high economic and social costs this brings with it. It needs political leadership though, leadership that recognises the problems for what they are and delivers a fully resourced and joined-up national strategy to deal with those problems in the most effective way possible. Crucially, it is leadership which is willing to make the case to the public at large that the current system benefits no one, and that real rehabilitation benefits us all.

For our part, Ofsted will continue to be unrelenting in calling out unacceptable and poor provision of education, skills and work opportunities for prisoners. More than ever, we have aligned the inspection of prisons to our common inspection framework, applying exactly the same expectations as we would of a school or college. At the same time will also celebrate and disseminate good practice where we find it. Let's hope that in the near future there will be more examples for us to do so.

But perhaps more importantly than what politicians can do, or government agencies like us, change also needs to come from the bottom up. Initiatives like the Unlocked Graduates programme have an important role to play in changing how we think about prisons and prisoners. I have no doubt that for the graduates joining the programme this year and starting their placements as prison officers there will be challenges aplenty. But hopefully lots of reward as well.

Importantly you will bring a fresh perspective to the role, and, I hope, will be able to inject new ideas and energy into building positive relationships with prisoners and making a real contribution to their rehabilitation. I also hope that as with your peers in schemes like TeachFirst you can play a role in raising the prestige of the profession and shining a spotlight on where things need to change.

To that end, I would urge you to really grasp this opportunity and maximise every chance you have to inspire people to choose a different path and turn their life around.

I wish you all the very best of luck.

Thank you.