Ongoing concerns about the new Prison Education Service contracts

The Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) claims that the Prison Service provided misleading information on "swingeing" cuts to education across the prison estate, which could reach up to 65 per cent in some jails. IMB national chair Elisabeth Davies said the Prison Service told IMB policy leads and board chairs that there had been no funding cut, it had "in fact" increased the monetary budget, and the appearance of a reduction was "inflationary pressures increasing the cost of education delivery". But Davies said a survey of 60 independent monitoring boards found budget cuts extended "far beyond" inflation which "appears to contradict" the statements given by the Prison Service, sparking calls for a "clear and public" ministerial explanation on how allocation decisions have resulted in "such severe and uneven" impact nationwide.

IMBs warn that teaching posts have been cut and class sizes expanded, leaving prisoners demotivated. Writing to Timpson last week, Davies expressed overwhelming concern over the lack of transparency, stating that while some prisons have not yet finalised their provision, "still more have noted that the effects of the cuts will not be fully realised for many months. The majority of boards expect the impact to be seismic." The letter underlines that the impact to prisoners is substantial, goes well beyond inflationary pressures, and is affecting prisoners' ability to engage in education, progress through sentence plans, and spend time out of their cells. Planned closures are now likely in prison education to save money, due to reduction in the number of teaching weeks delivered annually.

Paul Bridge, head of further education at University and College Union, estimated around 300 teaching staff had been made redundant and warned of "more to follow" as a result of cuts. Furthermore temporary staff are being employed to cope with the gaps left by redundancies. "It's chaos and the MOJ are hiding," he said.

The IMB also detailed "dramatic" cuts to Dynamic Purchasing System budgets, and pointed out that prisoners with learning difficulties were disproportionately affected by the cuts. Bridge demanded an independent review to shed light on prison-level budgets under the new Prison Education Service contract which awarded contracts to three existing providers – Milton Keynes College, PeoplePlus, and Novus.

Prisons are subject to incentive payments from the MOJ if they achieve quarterly Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) such as 'teaching and quality' and 'supporting additional learning needs', outlined in the Prison Education Service contract documents. But Davies claimed the 'teaching and quality' KPI had been omitted from the national contract, implying that problems were "anticipated".

Andy Slaughter, chair of the House of Commons justice committee, reiterated his November call for clarification on the scale and rationale for any planned cuts: "Prison education is already underfunded when compared to provision in the community, and such cuts risk undermining efforts to reduce reoffending"

https://feweek.co.uk/cuts-to-prison-education-being-hidden-says-watchdog/