

Stakeholder Hearing 14

User Voice

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Six Young Adults from User Voice

BACKGROUND

User Voice engages those who have experience of the criminal justice system in bringing about its reform and to reduce reoffending. The charity is led and delivered by ex-offenders with the aim of getting access to and insight from people within the criminal justice system to feed in to prompt changes in policy and to improve services.

They work with offenders and ex-offenders through a series of projects as part of the process of rehabilitation. They operate a policy of open ended contact, acknowledging that young people are at different points in their route to desistance.

User Voice facilitated a meeting between panel members and six young adults who had recently spent time in custody. The young adults were briefed, supported and de-briefed by User Voice staff throughout the experience, which they found cathartic and useful.

The remainder of this summary captures direct quotes from the young adults when they were posed the questions that form the headings.

Q. What are the sorts of things about being in prison that you think make someone feel most vulnerable, unsafe, sad or lonely?

“It would be helpful to receive an introduction to the prison service and if it was much quicker to establish contact with family.”

“It would be a good idea to have an introduction pack for families so that they could understand what was happening too and what to expect.”

“There should be more visits allowed at the beginning of the sentence.”

“There should be more screening for mental health issues.”

“At sixteen years old I already felt very alone and then I went into [name of prison], there was no one to talk to I put on a brave front and went back to my cell and cut up. I was full of fear that is why I put on a brave front particularly to people older than me.”

“When you first go in, all you get is a two minute phone call. You are vulnerable because you have no connection to the outside world that you know. The call is too short.”

“At Court you don’t have anyone’s telephone numbers, they are all stored on the phone, it took around 2 weeks to get numbers and the PIN phone sorted out.”

“Cutting became an ongoing pattern. No family, no money, an addict (which I didn’t realise). My behaviour was aggressive and I have borderline personality disorder but the prison was not aware of this.”

“The door closing on you is awful.”

“Bullying makes people feel suicidal. It takes too long to get your numbers on your PIN phone, shouting from cells, racial abuse in all ways. Threats [from other prisoners] to take your canteen or get beaten up. Can’t trust anyone, no support, too vulnerable to stick up for yourself. You have a dilemma: fight to stand up for yourself and so lose privileges, or co-operate and you get bullied. Officers don’t see this; they want an easy shift or they are waiting for more staff to turn up.”

“Officers are corrupt; they need to be chosen more wisely. Staff bring in drugs/alcohol/phones etc. An officer will bribe a prisoner to attack another.”

An example of corruption: “a young woman is on drugs and officers will sleep with her, bribe her with treats etc. You can’t report it – it’s an abuse of power.”

“There was a lady self-harmer, she cut too deep. Night staff didn’t have keys so prisoners hear the woman screaming and die...the staff couldn’t go into the cell. Half an hour after her body was moved someone else was moved in.”

“There are some nice officers.”

“Some use their position to abuse.”

“It is frustrating doing a long sentence, so you cut up.”

“ACCT is bright orange so everyone knows: it’s embarrassing.”

“If staff are watching why aren’t they seeing what else is going on – so why should I trust them?”

“Lack of private and confidential resources makes you feel uncomfortable, everyone knows your business.”

Q. What support do you get when a prisoners dies?

A. “There is a lot of resentment. Staff get time off but there is no support for prisoners.”

“They say, ‘we’ll put you on an ACCT’; what we need is, ‘How are you?’”

“Show empathy”.

"I did have a counsellor but I was too new to open up to them, I just wanted my family, you don't need to put on a front [with them]."

Re peer support: "They may breach your trust, may not be confidential."

"What the prison offers doesn't make me feel better, so I self-harm to make me feel better. A phone call home could stop the self-harm."

"Telephone calls are not private on the landing and if you're MAPPA 2, your calls get monitored but if they hear that you're vulnerable they don't do anything."

"Families don't know what to do. It's hard for them to get through to book a visit and the visit is too short and time is wasted" [referring to time wasted being kept waiting and getting to the visit].

"Prison officers make visitors feel inadequate, so that upsets the family."

Q. Regarding bullying and violence, how do Prison Officers behave? How could their behaviour improve?

"There are cameras that show Prison Officers' behaviour. If they make too many mistakes it should be picked up."

"A lot of mistakes are covered up by other staff, looking after each other. There should be external monitoring."

"Prison staff may not be picking up or cover up that they have seen signals of someone harming themselves."

"The IMB are all too old, we don't relate to them. Outside services who are more in tune with young people should be available."

"Samaritans are good."

"Peer Listeners are good, but there is a risk that they will leak [information]"

"It would be better to have people from the outside to speak to, who can relate to me, it would be good if they had an experience of custody too."

"It would be good to have someone at Reception who is an outside person, someone recognisable (not suited and booted), but who has gone through it and then has been successful, a role model."

"You're most vulnerable in the 'holding area' [in Reception]. You may not get the best advice."

"It's too quick with the nurses... there's not time to deal with you."

"They don't care."

"Sometimes you don't tell the nurse the truth because other inmates tell you not to, don't trust authority."

“Going to custody is humiliating. You meet rude, impatient people who want to wipe their hands of you.”

“When you’re coming off drugs you feel sick, you want to implode, or lash out and are scared. You need someone from outside to tell you what to expect.”

“Prison Officers turn a blind eye... don’t show empathy. Poor communication skills. You can’t open up to them.”

“There’s not enough staff. Not enough officers who care. Staff don’t want to know the detail, they just want to get on with their job. They don’t care what you’ve done, ‘your problem is not my problem’.”

“Staff don’t understand even if they do listen. “

“Personal Officers don’t have time to assess all their prisoners. After ‘Free flow’ you go back in your cell. At lunchtime they lock you up...they should use that time to speak to their prisoners; they have a ‘duty of care’.”

“I never trusted anyone until I met a programme manager from User Voice, it took me six years to open up. Professionals don’t understand, couldn’t imagine what I’ve been through.”

Attitude to bullying: “There’s containment around bullying rather than pro-active management – no group work around tackling the issue.”

“It was two weeks before I met my Personal Officer and then when I approached him he said ‘I’ll tell you when I have time for you.’”

‘Early days’ issues: “you need to connect with outside, need to make phone calls but credit goes so quickly, particularly to a mobile. Need to get clothes.”

“The walk from visits to cell is when you’re at your lowest. Staff could check if you’re OK.”

“You need officers to help, not just be nice. Show they understand by knowing what your issues are.” ‘Hi x, how are you? Are you OK?’ Just ask.”

“The prison should get your personal history, your background, from the court.”

Q. What activities out of cell would be good?

“At [name of prison] you have to run to get into education or you’re back in your cell.”

“Electricity goes off in cell during regime hours so there’s nothing to do.”

“There’re aren’t enough places in education so you are stuck in cell.”

“At [name of prison] rooms are brightly painted. In [name of prison] they are really dull which makes the environment worse. It’s like a rainy/dreary day – doesn’t do anything for the spirits.”

“At [name of prison] you could do quite a lot of interpreting for FNOs.”

“More courses that are useful, a more structured curriculum because you’re going to be limited for work by CRB checks.”

“Most of the time there aren’t enough places on courses.”

There should be:

- “workshops with life skills”,
- “cooking and cleaning”,
- “communication skills, how to have a normal conversation.”

“Toe-by-Toe is good to improve literacy.”

“It would be good to have more accredited [courses] so you can say you used your sentence constructively.”

“I did Open University at [name of prison] but not at [name of prison] because they didn’t have the resources.”

“You should have paint and paper in cell, so that you can create something of your own. This would be especially good when on induction.”

Suggestions for out of cell and in cell activities: knitting or similar, musical instruments, crafts, paintings.

“CDs can lead to bullying.”

Q. How do we stop bullying caused by being vulnerable?

“ACCT is an embarrassing factor”.

“If they were properly listening to you they could write it up when they got back to the office.”

“There is a real problem with confidentiality.”

“Being on an ACCT doesn’t help because stuff that is supposed to happen, doesn’t.”

“People tease you.”

“Phones in cell is a good thing: there’s no queue, no bullying and you should be able to have incoming calls from a restricted list.”

“There’s a ‘them and us’ in prison; lack of trust and off-hand behaviour of staff.”

“There’s a hopelessness by staff and prisoners.”

“Services should be more tailored to the end users.”

“Don’t trust the complaint system.”

“I’d lie to get off an ACCT.”

Q. What could staff do to improve some of these things?

“Change the uniform in Reception, it’s intimidating, black, with chains and buckles.”

“Wearing jeans etc. Would be a bit more relaxed and then it would change their body language. An officer might be a bit more relaxed.”

“Then they will listen more, there will be less of a barrier.”

“First impressions mean everything.”

“We’re human beings, don’t judge us: show us respect.”

“It’s intimidating in the first place.”

“First night at [name of prison] is quite nice, staff are friendly and willing...Then it gets bad.”

“If staff handle you with arrogance, I’ll give it back.”

Q. Are Mental Health issues well recognised and managed?

“No, not by prison staff or health care.”

“They wait to be told – they don’t recognise the different issues.”

“Healthcare screening doesn’t pick up issues; it’s too short. Also prisoners may not know what all their problems are. So take a bit of extra time.”

“It took me two years to trust the mental health in-reach people. There may be a life time of issues.”

“There can be a problem following up on medication when you’re discharged and so you end up going back in [to prison].”

Regarding Resettlement and ‘Through the Gate’: “[they] need to be better and provided by outside agencies who are trained in the relevant field to support resettlement.”

“For some people prison is their home. They are vulnerable when they’re due for release.”

Q. Do you have any experience of a self-inflicted death in prison?

“This girl’s crime was in the news so everyone was horrible to her – who does she go to?”

There was a girl who, “hanged herself over not getting canteen containing tobacco, couldn’t they just give her a fag.”

Q. Do you have confidence in the Listeners?

“They take the person to the Listener when they press the button Go to a different environment and the walk there will calm you down.”

“No, because I’m paranoid and have personal experience of a Listener breaching a confidence.”

“Who does the Listener off load to?”

“They do a good job for some people.”

“It would be better if Listeners were from the outside... Samaritans.” Example given of a Listener blackmailing with the information they have.

“A lot of pressure is put on Listeners. They’re used as a substitute for healthcare.”

“If you want to kill yourself you don’t make a scene, you just do it. If it’s a cry for help everyone knows.”

“User Voice volunteers need support...need to off-load. So do Listeners.”

“User Voice and other ex-offenders want work, they want to help prisoners - use them to do this work.” “They can do this through visits, they can visit and help and then can make any follow up necessary.”

Q. Are you aware of any problems of gangs in prisons?

“Putting everyone in together is not helpful, you just talk about your crimes.”

“They need someone to show them a better life.”

“Gangs make things work if they are against each other.” “Some people have to join a gang that is from their locality.”

“Wages in prison don’t match the prices on the canteen sheet, this means you can’t buy the things you need to make life more bearable – you have pride, you can’t borrow things.”

Other comments:

“Those who laugh the loudest cry the most.”

“Education, reading and writing are critical, without them you’re vulnerable, it’s empowering to learn.”

“Don’t send me to the middle of Manchester when I’m from London.”

Prisoners need:

- “A Family Liaison Officer (FLO) point of contact for families to phone into – a designated point of contact for families to phone.” “Only chaplaincy are used for this.” “Could promote the FLOs in the Visits Room.”
- “OMU (Offender Management Unit) should do more to hand over to Probation – it should reflect what you have done/achieved during your sentence.”

“Having to use your own phone credit to speak to a Probation Officer – you should be able to do this from OMU.”