

The Harris Review

Strategy for Direct Engagement
with Young Adults (18-24)

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Background

The scope of evidence considered by the Harris Review was considerable. While many of the topics deliberated were relevant to wider age ranges in custody, the Review was mindful of its brief to focus on young adults between 18 and 24. The Review purposefully pursued evidence on matters relevant to this age range, including on the development of maturity. A very successful round-table event to explore the specific characteristics of young adults was held in December 2014.¹

The Terms of Reference for the Harris Review state that the stakeholder's views that should be taken into account include young adults in custody. It was, however, challenging for the Review to come up with effective means of constructively engaging with young adults in custody, particularly because of the need to balance meeting the terms of reference with limited resources to commission research. We were also aware that the young adults with whom we wanted to engage would be difficult to access and might not know about the Review.

By July 2014, the Review had agreed on a strategy to directly engage with young adults that ultimately yielded rich material, given orally and in writing, on their direct experiences in custody. Examples of the insightful, heartfelt, occasionally provocative, and frequently heart-rending, accounts are provided throughout the *Changing Prisons- Saving Lives Report*. This paper describes the methods used in a bit more detail.

Objectives of the Young Adult Engagement Strategy

The Review determined that the objectives of the strategy to engage young adults directly with the review was to:

- To raise awareness of The Harris Review among young adults.
- To get an understanding of young adult's views on issues related to the subject of the Review.
- To enable young adults to submit their own experiences about issues pertinent to the Review.

The first objective was partially achieved through two short articles in the prisoner magazine Inside Time, and then enhanced with Prison Radio advertisements and an interview with Lord Harris (also on Prison Radio). As well as this, three specific activities were agreed to deliver the objectives and specifically target and engage young adults. These were:

1. Direct Engagement at Prison Visits
2. Official Hearing with young adults facilitated by User Voice
3. A targeted survey using Prison Radio and a questionnaire sent to a small number of institutions

These are now each described in more detail.

1. Direct Engagement at Prison Visits

The Harris Review visited nine prisons/ YOIs during the course of the Review and summaries of these visits are available at <http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/harris-review/events>. During all visits, panel members had the opportunity to speak to prisoners as they toured the prison. Most of the establishments visited also arranged specific meetings between groups of young adults and/or

¹ A summary of the round table event is available at: <http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Summary-of-Harris-Review-Young-Adult-Characteristics-Round-Table-Event.pdf>.

individual young adults and the panel, so that their experiences could be discussed in more detail and without fear of reprisal from staff who might overhear.

The direct contact with young adults during the visits to establishments was enormously valuable in helping the Review understand the context of the environment that they were living in, the distresses they experienced, and the factors that helped moderate this distress. Panel members also used the opportunity to explain to young adults the purpose of the Review and how they might further contribute by submitting written evidence to the Review.

Some of the points raised at different establishments were very similar. In particular, young adults were vocal about the importance of contact with their families, both by phone and visits. The Review heard consistent messages about the distress caused to young adults and to their families because of the short length of visits, or because visiting the prison was so arduous and difficult for family members that fewer visits were made. Young adults also spoke of the importance of phone calls when they were feeling low, and of how difficulties making phone calls increased their distress.

There were mixed views about the Listeners' Scheme, even though most of the young adults we spoke to were volunteers on the Scheme. There was agreement that the concept was a good one, but many young adults did not feel it was implemented properly in their particular establishment. A small number of young adults gave examples of when they felt it had worked, and this appeared to be considered a very positive thing.

Other issues that were raised by young adults include:

- Inconsistency with how prison staff supported and enabled the Listener Scheme, and how important that support was;
- Disparity between supportive prison staff and those who treated the young adults discourteously;
- The importance of prison officers who took the time to sit and chat to prisoners;
- The anguish and frustration young adults felt when they were locked up in their cells for long periods because of staff shortages.

2. Official Hearing with young adults facilitated by User Voice

The Review arranged with User Voice for a group of young adults who had been in custody to meet the panel and to give evidence directly to them. User Voice engages those who have experience of the criminal justice system in bring about its reform and to reduce re-offending. It aims to get access to and insight from people within the criminal justice system to improve services. User Voice facilitated the meeting between the Review and six young adults who had recently spent time in custody, accompanied by two staff members with similar experiences. The young adults were briefed, supported and de-briefed by User Voice staff throughout the experience, which they found cathartic and useful. The Hearing took place on the 4th of September 2014.

It was agreed with User Voice that this group would meet with the panel for approximately 2 hours, and that the focus would remain around the 4 or 5 pre-arranged questions. The questions were adapted from the questions developed as part of the survey distributed to prisons, as will be described later. It was agreed with the panel that follow up questions would be allowed, as long as they were not distressing, and the panel remained mindful of the vulnerability of the young adults throughout the hearing.

The questions around which the engagement was loosely structured were:

1. What are the sorts of things about being in prison that you think make someone feel most vulnerable, unsafe, sad or lonely?
2. What, if anything, could help someone to feel better? What, if different, could make someone feel better faster?
3. What sort of things might help someone feel safer while in custody? Do you think things such as visits from family, being busy with education or work, association time, access to the internet, talking to staff, talking to a listener, speaking to a peer or something else might help?
4. What sort of things do staff members do to help young people who are in custody feel safe and cared for? What might they do differently?
5. Has there ever been a time when you or someone who you know in prison has made you feel so frustrated, sad, or unsafe that you felt suicidal? If so, can you tell us what caused these feelings and what helped you, or the person you know, to get through it?

During the Hearing, the young adults articulately described how difficult they found their experiences in custody, and how lonely and isolated they felt. For example, one young adult commented *“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.”* A few described the bleakness of the custodial environment. Comments were made such as *“It’s intimidating in the first place”* and *“In prison [rooms] are really dull which makes the environment worse. It’s like a rainy/dreary day – doesn’t do anything for the spirits.”*

The panel noticed how this bleak environment seemed to mean that even small things could cause a lot of distress, or conversely could alleviate stress. For example, one young woman described a woman who *“hanged herself over not getting canteen containing tobacco, couldn’t they just give her a fag.”* Another said that something as simple as a *“phone call home could stop the self-harm.”*

Many young adults felt that better relationships between prison officers and young adults would improve the experience, but suggested that the prison officers’ behaviour led to a lack of trust. One young adult said: *“If staff are watching why aren’t they seeing what else is going on – so why should I trust them?”* Another explained *“Prison Officers turn a blind eye... don’t show empathy... You can’t open up to them.”*

The panel were particularly struck by some of the points the young adults we spoke to made about the difference between them and the individuals – whether staff or volunteers – who they had contact with. It was salient that they included volunteers coming into the prison and IMB members as well as prison staff. The young adults pointed out that they had little in common with the volunteers who came into the prison, who were usually, older, white and middle class. One young man pointed at one of the panel members and explained that these volunteers were dressed in nice suits like him, and had no idea what it was like to come from his background. Comments included *“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”* and *“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”* and *“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.”*

The hearing provided valuable evidence to the Review, but it also enhanced the understanding of the panel members of the experiences of young adults. A full summary of the hearing is available at <http://iapedeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/User-Voice.pdf>.

3. A Targeted Survey

While ideally the Review would have undertaken a comprehensive survey of the views and experiences of young adults across the custodial estate, we had neither the resources nor the time to conduct this effectively. Instead, we devised a short, simple and targeted questionnaire to distribute to a more limited number of young adults. It was planned that this would be distributed to young adults in five institutions, although in the end we received responses from four establishments.

With the support of NOMS Director of Public Sector Prisons, the Review approached five institutions to ask for their participation in the survey, and all establishments agreed. The Review was mindful that, through prison visits and the qualitative survey on staff perceptions that we commissioned Rand Europe and the University of Cambridge to conduct, it had already drawn on the resources and time of prison staff and governors. The Review negotiated with the President of the National Council of IMBs for IMB volunteers to distribute the questionnaire instead of prison staff. The questionnaires could be completed anonymously by prisoners and posted in drop boxes on the wings.

The questionnaire (see Annex A to this paper) was developed with the advice and quality assurance input of the Samaritans, User Voice and the National Council – Independent Monitoring Boards. It briefly described the purpose of the survey, explained that it was confidential and set out how prisoners can give their views.

The questionnaire itself consisted of seven questions, five of which were open ended. Returns were received from four of the five establishments that were originally contacted (further details are given in *Appendix 3 – The Approach and Methods used by the Review*, in the final report of the Harris Review, *Changing Prisons, Saving Lives*). Of the 54 returns that were from young adults, 6 were not usable or were defaced, so it was only the remaining 48 that were collated and considered by the panel for the purposes of the evidence considered for the Review.

Young adults across all establishments were also given the opportunity to offer views, opinions and responses to questions by phoning a Prison Radio Freephone number and leaving a recorded message. These messages – a total of 50 were left - were later transcribed and included as evidence with the questionnaires.

This mechanism, and indeed the entire exercise, was publicized through the second article the Review commissioned in 'INSIDE TIME' and through an advertisement and an interview with Lord Toby Harris on Prison Radio.

3.1 Responses to the Survey Questionnaire

Of the 65 responses received, 10 were from adults and 1 from a 17 year old. Of the remaining 54 responses from young adults, 6 were excluded because they were defaced or not usable. While the 11 responses that were not in the targeted age-range were technically omitted from the more detailed analysis of the panel, the information provided in them was very similar to the information given in the 48 questionnaires that were considered by the panel.

Seven of the 48 questionnaires considered by the panel contained specific reference to the individual's own thoughts or actions around self-harm and/or suicide², and six referred to particular incidents involving someone else.

Most of the questions in the survey were open-ended (see Annex A), but Question 4 asked for tick-box responses. Question 4, and the number of times each potential response was ticked is summarised as follows:

² This is defined as a specific reference to at least one incident where the individual thought about or acted on thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Which of the following things do you think would help someone to feel safer while in custody:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Visits from family	27
<input type="checkbox"/>	Being busy with education and/or work opportunities	21
<input type="checkbox"/>	Association time	19
<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to the internet	19
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talking to staff	13
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talking to a Listener	11
<input type="checkbox"/>	Speaking to peer support	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	Something else (please say)	_____

Some of the responses that were given for 'other' included *Better reward system, Overnight visit from friends and family, Phons in cells, Teaching young adults consequences of their actions both inside, access to hospital treatment and outside custodial establishment.*

Some of the written responses that the Harris Review received included distressing comments about the young adult's state of mind. These included comments that ranged from "I need help", "dont no what to do an who to talk to" (sic) and "sometimes prison makes you feel trapped [and] you feel like dere aint nothing good in your life sometimes freedom seems like it is never going to come [and] that can make people feel like dere's nothing left" (sic), to descriptions of suicidal feelings or suicide attempts. One 21 year old said "I took 150 paracetamol + nearly died. This is because I was low + depressed + staff treating me like shit on there shoe pushed me too far" (sic). Another young adult gave a graphic and upsetting description, that included a drawing of himself hanging from a ligature point on the ceiling, and instructions on what belongings he wanted sent to his mother after he was found. The young man (23) wrote "when I have killed myself there will be 2 suicide notes in my sockes 1 for my girlfriend and 1 for my mum. Thanks" (sic).³

Like the young adults who we spoke to during prison visits and from User Voice, the young adults who responded to the survey highlighted contact with family as being important. In response to the first question (**what are the sorts of things about being in prison that you think make someone feel most vulnerable, unsafe, sad or lonely?**), one 20 year old wrote "the hardest thing I think is being away from family and I feel sad and lonely because I didn't realise how good my life was until I got put in here." Another young adult of 21 years, at a different institution, responded to the same question by saying "as a young offender I felt really vulnerable and scared coming to prison. The main issue is loneliness. Prison breaks you away from your family". Later in the questionnaire, this young adult went on to explain "I keep going on ACCT plans because I don't get visits and don't see my family I just feel lonely so I get depressed and self harm and then feel suicidal." This particular young adult wrote in the margins of the questionnaire to explain that his home town was too far away from the prison for him to get visits.

A number of respondents highlighted more contact, or the means to make more phonecalls, as being something that could "make someone feel better" (question 3) or "the sort of things staff members do to help" (question 4). Answers included, "if phone calls were cheaper, if YO had an weekly phone allowance that was provided by the prison (maybe a weekly allowance to a specific contact such as parents" (sic) and "more visits and more contact from the outside like internet" and "more family visits. Cheaper phone calls." One young adult wrote "for me being able to spend time with my family helps but also knowing that someone cares how you feel."

³ It should be noted that all suicide threats were referred back to the appropriate staff in the prison by IMB members.

The survey responses also demonstrated the weight that young adults put on their relationships with and the attitude of prison staff around them. One 21 year old commented *“staffs general attitude has a big impact on prisoners mood.”* In answer to question 3 (**what could help someone feel better? What could make someone feel better faster?**), the same young adult said *“staff speaking to prisoners with a decent attitude – not speaking to us like shit for no reason.”* In response to the same question, a young adult from a different institution said *“if the staff did their jobs properly and helped troubled YO’s instead of talking to us like shit whenever we approach them”*. Another 20 year old from that institution admitted *“overall I don’t think the staff are bad when you get to no them but there are a few I dont like to be honest they talk to us like dirt”* (sic). One young adult who was highlighting what things helped while in custody, said *“I find talking to a member of staff is helpful only if you can see they are listening to wot you say and give you 5 minutes of there time it goes a long way”* (sic). This young adult, who was 20 years of age, named two officers in particular who had *“cheered me up when ime down and I appreciate there time”* (sic). The way certain staff members connected with young adults, a point we noted during prison visits, was a theme that came up again. One wrote *“my [personal officer] has helped me a lot and has distracted from some very difficult things.”* Another young adult wrote *“people at [institution] have a close connection to staff so staff are willing to listen to YP’s problems”*. Another young adult also explained how he found *“some are very helpful and considerate of young people’s feelings.”*

3.2 Responses left on the Prison Radio phone line

There were 50 phone calls made to the Prison Radio phone helpline that was advertised on Prison Radio and in an article in INSIDE TIME, although a handful were from individuals who phoned more than once. Twelve calls were offensive or indecipherable and were not included in the transcripts that the Harris Review panel considered.

The remaining 38 recordings left on the phone line did not follow a specific format and callers did not attempt to directly answer the questions in the survey. It was interesting then, that while some of the same themes that were noted through the rest of the engagement came up, some new issues were also raised. While many of the callers referred specifically to young adults or to young offenders, we don’t have a record of what age they were.

A much larger proportion of callers said they had been suicidal themselves, or had attempted suicide, than those who responded to the questionnaires. Eighteen of the thirty-eight responses referred specifically to the individual’s own thoughts or actions about self-harm and/or suicide. This means that about 47% of the phone messages considered by the panel contained information about the individual’s own thoughts or actions about suicide and/or self-harm, compared to 27% of the completed survey questionnaires considered. An additional (at least two cases described their own and another’s distress in relation to self-harm or suicide) 13 made reference to other individuals in prison who thought about or acted on thoughts of self-harm or suicide (one of these was a mother who phoned about her son).

Many callers also described how low they felt when they made attempts at suicide or self harm. Some callers left distressing messages about current distress, such as *“I really need to speak to somebody...please, please can someone come and speak to me.”* Another explained that he recently tried to commit suicide and that *“I feel I’m not getting a lot of great support or help off people.”* He gave his name and his details at the prison where he was located and said *“I would be very grateful if someone could get in contact with me as soon as possible please.”* There were other similar messages, with full contact details given and an expression of their desire to speak to someone. One said: *“I’ve told staff on many occasions that I’m feeling suicidal. They’ve not done nothing... I don’t know which way to turn, I don’t know who to ask for help and I just feel alone. I keep asking for the*

*Samaritans phone; I'm not getting the Samaritan's phone off of them. It's just like I said, I don't know which way to turn. I need help, so, if someone can help me..."*⁴

As with our other engagement with young adults, some callers pointed out what difficult places prisons are for young adults. One caller said *"the biggest thing for me is I've been coming to jail since I was 16. I think a lot of people feel vulnerable because it's quite intimidating."* Another said *"they could have a lot of issues in their head and then come to jail, and the issues play on their mind and it just goes over and over in your head when you're in a jail, sitting in a cell on your own."*

A few identified family events or problems as being the trigger for self-harm, including two callers who mentioned attempts at self-harm that were related to the death of their grandmother. One young woman who said she was 20 years of age, said *"...young offenders self-harm because of family problems and that is definitely... what I done before."* One man phoned to say that he had attempted suicide on a number of occasions *"through losing my daughter and my sister in a car crash. It got me really down and I wasn't really wanting to talk to... they ask some people to speak to listeners... they just palm you off... there should be more support in jails for people that have been in situations like myself."*

As with the other forms of engagement, we heard mixed views about the Listener Scheme. One caller said of Listeners *"in some prisoners' eyes it's just another prisoner and really you can't open up to them, so it's hard to sit there and speak to another prisoner who you don't know and you're trusting them with everything you said and all it takes is for them to go spread it and before you know it the whole jail knows about your issues."*

Some very negative comments were left about prison staff. One caller said he lost a friend at a previous prison and that *"he hung himself because he was being bullied by staff."* Another example was given of a young man who had a tendency to pick at a cut on his arm, which caused bleeding. He claimed that staff told him not to press his bell the next time he bled because they wouldn't answer it. The caller went on to say *"he went quiet for all of half an hour, 45 minutes; people are trying to call him, he didn't respond. We're pressing our bells to tell them that, but they said they don't care. They went back downstairs to the office and sat on their arses. They do not care and it is disgusting, but as I said, it is what it is and no-one's going to change it, no-one's going to do nothing about it... the truth needs to come out."* Like the survey questionnaires, however, other callers felt that some staff were more helpful than others, and some pointed out that staff were supportive. One caller said *"the nurses and the mental health team and that have been excellent to me"* and another, who was on a healthcare wing said *"the staff here are quite helpful."*

Some callers made suggestions as to how the prison might help young adults who were inclined to self-harm. For example, one caller said *"this issue can be solved by putting the people with high risk and self-harming issues into double cells so they can be looked after by other people is another way of helping others in life."*

⁴ These messages were all intercepted by Prison Service Radio before they were handed over to the Harris Review. Each message in which the caller asked for help, or described suicidal feelings, was referred on to the appropriate Safer Custody Team at the prison.

Conclusions

The engagement with young adults was an integral element to the Harris Review and its conclusions. Over and above the wealth of information the panel considered from the direct engagement and the products of the engagement, the Review members found the experience rewarding and enriching. The young adults with whom we engaged directly were candid and open, sharing with us some sensitive and deeply personal experiences. The Review is sincerely grateful to those young adults who talked openly about their experiences, their distress, and their hopes for the future.

Those who wrote their views in response to the survey, or who left messages on the phone line, also shared intimate experiences with the Review. The Review panel was collectively and individually moved by the messages, which were discussed at a number of meetings.

While the input of the young adults who contributed to the Harris Review has impacted on the overall conclusions and recommendations set out in the final report, there are some more specific conclusions that can also be drawn from the totality of the young adult engagement. Some consistent themes emerged from the different methods of engagement. The descriptions of the experiences and views of the young adults who engaged with the Harris Review have led to us reach the following conclusions:

- The young adults we engaged with have given descriptions of their experience of being in prison that demonstrated to us a perception of the severity of the prison environment, particularly time spent alone in cells, and potentially to the detriment of mental well-being. The impact seemed to the Review more than the loss of liberty and the privileges associated with that;
- Related to this, our observations led us to conclude that some events that are experienced when a young adult is in prison can have a disproportionate impact on their mental well-being, in a way that they would not in other environments;
- The evidence we have reviewed suggests that many young adults receive significant support from their families, which, if allowed to continue through regular contact, can moderate the impact of imprisonment. A deterioration in family contact, however, can lead to an increase in distress and loneliness, which can often be considerable;
- Our consideration of the accounts of young adults suggests that positive relationships with staff (of all sorts) can help to reduce distress, often in disturbing circumstances. On the other hand, the Review was concerned about the consistent accounts of harsh treatment and contempt by prison staff, even if this was limited to particular individuals;
- The young adults we engaged with convinced us that the Listeners Scheme can be helpful, but is not implemented or supported consistently throughout the estate. There is some concern about whether Listeners can always be trusted to respect the confidentiality of their peers.

3. Which of the following things do you think would help someone to feel safer while in custody:

- Visits from family
- Being busy with education and/or work opportunities
- Association time
- Access to the internet
- Talking to staff
- Talking to a Listener
- Speaking to peer support
- Something else (please say): _____

4. What sort of things do staff members do to help young people who are in custody feel safe and cared for? What might they do differently?

5. Has there ever been a time when you or someone who you know in prison has made you feel so frustrated, sad, or unsafe that you felt suicidal? If so, can you tell us what caused these feelings and what helped you, or the person you know, to get through it?