



# Inside Information

A quiet revolution is occurring within the walls of Maidstone prison, where an inmate-elected council is giving the prisoners a sense of responsibility and community. Michael Parker reports

Votes for prisoners is rather a sensitive topic at the moment, which is perhaps why HMP Maidstone's governor, Andy Hudson, looks slightly nervous as flashbulbs pop around the ballot box in the prison's chapel.

Governor for only 18 months, he has already made several radical changes. He integrated the prison's population of 400 sex offenders and 200 foreign nationals from their previously segregated wings and, last month, all 600 inmates and staff elected a new prison council. The inmates campaign for election as part of four themed parties, with manifestos that reflect

inmates' different priorities – education or life after prison, for example. The vote, held annually, elects 20 inmates to a council in proportion to the share of the vote their parties win.

The project is led by User Voice, a charity founded and run by former prisoners which tackles persistent re-offending by involving prisoners, young people and marginalised groups in the forces that govern their lives – whether that's on their housing estates or on the wings of Maidstone Prison.

A User Voice survey of prison governors revealed that their overwhelming concerns were better relations between prisoners and staff, a forum for communicating changes and for prisoner dissatisfaction to be heard, and ways to improve prisoner self-esteem.

Based on these needs, in 2009 the charity piloted its User Voice council at HMP Isle Of Wight. A follow-up report noted a 37 per cent reduction in complaints from prisoners, while solitary confinement days were reduced from 160 to 47.

Governor Hudson explained how his interest in the scheme grew after meeting User Voice founder and ex-offender Mark Johnson. "I searched for 'offender engagement' on the internet, and all it came back with was 'offender management'. How people are treated has a direct impact on how they behave,



and we're here to produce good citizens, not good prisoners," says Hudson.

Johnson explains that prisoners are in a unique position to help themselves: "The Prison Service could not do for prisoners what they can do better for themselves within their own community. This gives them responsibility, an opportunity to change their community from within. It will promote citizenship on release."

After receiving training sessions in political campaigning and public speaking from User Voice and local councillor Mike FitzGerald, Maidstone's inmates establish four parties - Education, Resettlement, Diversity And Equality, and Community - reflecting prisoners' different priorities. On polling day, excitement within the prison is palpable.

James, a 27-year-old from Crawley, is an Education party candidate. "The best way to keep people out of prison is to keep them educated and supported, to keep them away from the circumstances that led them down the path to prison," he says. "There are things we can't change in prison but with a bit of lateral thinking we can influence the things we can. If we have limited classroom time, for example, we can help students work more in their cells. And we can focus on life skills like paying bills, changing a fuse, setting up direct debits so that people are ready when they come out."

Paul, 53, from Dover, is standing for the Community party. "By ensuring that prisoners are treated like adults and involved in the decisions that affect them, then they'll act like adults. Respect works both ways and more settled, happier prisoners means less problems for staff," he says.

### We're here to produce good citizens, not good prisoners

Eddie, 35, is the genial leader of the Diversity And Equality party. Originally from West Africa and formerly resident in Paris, he explains that harmony inside the prison comes from removing barriers between the two, until recently segregated, groups of prisoners: "We need to ensure that we have equal opportunities, mutual respect among prisoners, and between staff and prisoners."

Resettlement party candidate Paul, from Surrey, is enthusiastic about the process. "I've discovered something I had no idea about. It's given me a totally different outlook on life," the 46-year-old says. "I've realised that I can make a difference if I want to. It's helped me in ways I never thought possible."

Meeting Johnson had a profound effect upon Paul. "Here's someone who's done so much, but he's just like me - drugs, alcohol, down and out and been

through AA. I thought, if he can do it, so can I. Things don't have to end badly."

Putting released prisoners into hostels makes it easier for them to slip back into old ways, Paul says: "Hostels are full of users and drinkers, and you get back to old behaviours, which leads to criminality. Boredom is a killer - six months on the outside with temptation, no money, and nothing to do is like a life sentence."

The election result, announced by the returning officer and chief executive of Maidstone Council, Alison Broome, sees the Diversity And Equality party return with nine seats, Resettlement with seven, and Community and Education with two each.

How well the council functions and how the parties get along at their monthly meetings remains to be seen. But Education party candidate James is optimistic: "We're not fighting against each other as parties, we're all in it together and our ideas overlap. We're just putting common sense back into the system."

Johnson adds: "It's not always empowering the most chaotic and marginalised groups in society, and it doesn't always work, but if people at the sharp end of the system are not equipped to lead successful lives then we will never reduce re-offending. It's not hard to find out what's needed: you just have to ask them."