

about their pasts and hopeful about their future, with forthright ideas on education, employment and offender rehabilitation.

"These youngsters are the experts in their own problems," says the charity's founder, Mark Johnson. "User Voice provides the means by which they can come together with people who can

really make a difference in their lives.

"This level of articulation increases the capacity of policy makers to listen to excluded youth in a transparent and democratic way."

The charity, which was formally launched this year, has been key in giving such marginalised groups a platform in front of MPs, lords, probation staff, prison services and government strategists to name a few.

Johnson based the organisation's unique model on his own experiences of addiction, homelessness and repeat offending.

"These are the kind of young people that everyone usually crosses the road to avoid. What we aim to show is that, given the right support and encouragement, they can be part of the solution in reducing crime and improving services."

User Voice is staffed by ex-offenders and began its flagship project, prison councils, in three prisons on the Isle Of Wight last year, in an effort to involve prisoners democratically in their day-to-day lives and in shaping their futures on the outside.

In the run-up to last week's conference, User Voice worked with more than 600 young people, many of whom have been excluded from school, have experience of the criminal justice system, or are on the cusp of offending.

The charity pinpointed a range of reasons why children turn to crime, but recent research carried out by the organisation revealed that, overwhelmingly, participants were from poorer families living in deprived areas. Like Ibiza, many had experienced dysfunctional young lives.

Among the conference attendees was formerly homeless rapper, and Mercury Prize winner, Speech Debelle, who has filmed a documentary with User Voice about Britain's excluded youth.

She said, "My next album will be called Freedom Of Speech, and that's what User Voice is about. It gives young people credit about things to do with their own lives. Many of them have more common sense than a lot of adults. They know their own issues and they should be heard."

For more information go to www.uservoice.org

User Voice Making the most of insider knowledge

It was the prison visits to see his mother that Ibiza remembers as the worst. Now 25, he was just 17 when she was sentenced for drug offences.

"The searches were awful. I was a kid going to see my mum and I felt like a criminal," says Ibiza, whose father was also in prison throughout much of his childhood. "The only time anyone in authority asked me questions was to collect evidence on my own mother."

Speaking last week at a conference organised by the charity User Voice, Ibiza was one of 30 youngsters from around the country who came to London to talk to leading policy-makers in criminal justice.

While each teenager's story was unique, similar threads ran through all their experiences - from the care system to addiction to youth crime to imprisonment. All were brutally open



London rapper
Speech Debelle
is working with
excluded youth