THE USER VOICE OF LEARNING AND SKILLS IN PRISON

Offenders give their views on the provision of learning and skills

a User Voice event commissioned by A4e
In November 2008, a series of workshops were held to listen to offenders’ views of the provision of learning and skills in prison.

Listening to users to improve public services is not a new concept; in fact, it is commonplace. Yet some marginalised groups are almost entirely missing from user engagement strategies; this is particularly true of offenders.

This series of workshops provided a unique approach to offender learning and skills evaluation. Debate was restricted to users of the criminal justice system, who acted as representatives of the wider prison community by conducting a series of their own peer-led evaluations.

The seminar was undertaken by User Voice, an organisation established by Mark Johnson to transport the voice of offenders and ex-offenders into policy design and delivery, and commissioned by A4e. The event was run and organised by offenders, including the design of questions. Neither the commissioning organisation nor administrators, although present, took part in the discussions. This helped increased levels of confidence and openness within the group. The event was run by offenders, for offenders.

Delegates were drawn from a random cross section of the prison community. Some were currently engaged in learning or skills courses and others were not.

Empowering prisoners has been regarded as morally questionable and politically dangerous. But when given a chance to speak, the voice of the user of the criminal justice system can add crucially-needed insight and value to the provision of learning and skills in prison.
All participants stressed their desire to begin their rehabilitation through learning in prison, recognising the opportunity that incarceration presented and the benefits it provided.

Through their personal experiences, a number of key messages were highlighted to improve the provision of learning and skills:

1. **Progression**

2. **Consistency**

3. **Communication**

4. **Employability**

"I built on my own initiative to take advantage of the learning opportunities available to me. I found that I could learn and improve my skills if I took the time to be persistent and determined."
Participants identified that the **assessment of offenders should be integral** to the **sentence plan**. This can offer a clear route for progression in learning and skills. As a result of initial assessments, the provision of basic learning and skills is, in general, good, as those with basic literacy and numeracy needs are able to take the necessary courses.

But for many the **limited provision of courses** and **access to resources** to progress to Level 3 and to further and higher education provided a significant barrier to personal development in prison.

Those on **indeterminate sentences** find it **difficult** to **access vocational courses** or **distance learning** as priority is given to those with early release dates. It is difficult to maintain motivation and hope without some sense of progression, which is crucial for personal development and to provide a goal.

From their experiences, delegates suggested that in prison there should be a **greater focus** on enabling learners to gain **access to courses beyond** the **most basic** at a time when they are **ready** to take them.

On release many learners are encouraged to consider further education – two-thirds of participants indicated they want to – but **more support** is needed in the ‘know how’ of **accessing** courses or in providing **awareness** that they exist.

"**The door needs to be open when you are ready to change**"
“When I started my sentence I couldn’t read too well, but got help from a literacy course. I started an Open University course and got 90 points, but I’m not allowed a laptop here.”

“You need to think about this as a long term goal, you need to do it for yourself. They can’t take your qualification away from you.”
**CONSISTENCY**

Differences in the experiences of offenders undermine the effectiveness of offender learning.

Priority is given to offenders on medium term sentences, so offenders with short term and long term sentences have more limited access to learning. Those with long term sentences said that learning was directly related to their self development, by enabling them to do something meaningful during their period in custody. Inability to access learning reduces chances of rehabilitation and creates resentment, only reinforcing offending behaviour.

Delegates identified the need for greater consistency across the Prison Service to maintain clear progression in learning through any transfer. Learners are faced with the prospect of not being able to continue with a course when transferring between prisons, even of the same category, as a result of different prison regimes.

"I completed all the courses set out in my plan, but was refused a tag. But I know others who got released on tag who had not done the courses"

"In another prison they have trained insiders who offer peer support to other offenders. They are put on a 6 month hold once they have been trained so they won’t be moved"
Most participants said that a lack of communication between offenders, the Learning and Skills Team and the Offender Management Unit was a barrier to accessing learning and skills. Each decision has to pass through a number of people for an offender to be allocated on a course. Those who are ready to change eventually will give up if the resources are not in place when they make this important decision.

It was suggested that more control over access to learning should be given back to the Learning and Skills Team within prison. Learning and skills provision is now much more closely linked to sentence plans, managed by Offender Managers, which means that learning and skills staff have little control over who benefits from accessing courses. Learning and skills staff are better equipped to carry out the assessment of training needs.

Learning and skills staff are also able to provide more information on accessing learning as participants said that it often doesn’t get passed down. This is often done at induction which is a very chaotic period. Information about learning opportunities should be given only once offenders have settled into the new regime.

Prisoners also have an important role to play. Using prisoners to encourage and help other prisoners into learning will provide healthy peer representation instigating change in others, especially those with negative experiences of learning in the past.

When learners are put forward, more transparency is needed in allocating courses to manage expectations. Whilst offenders are told that they will be on a waiting list for a particular education course, they don’t have any indication of the length of time they may have to wait.
“THERE ARE MEN ON THE WINGS WHO HAVE COME INTO PRISON NOT BEING ABLE TO READ AND WRITE. THEY ASKED ME FOR HELP WITH WRITING LETTERS HOME AND I’VE SUGGESTED THEY GO TO EDUCATION. IT’S GOT TO START BY US HELPING EACH OTHER.”
Offenders said that they wanted a **wider variety of courses** to be on offer. Most said that more **practical, trade based courses** with direct links to employment would be most beneficial. It is easier to be **self-employed** with these skills, which offer **more flexibility** for individuals with an offending history, who may be recovering from drug or alcohol dependency, are newly established at living crime free and with possible relocation issues. This also removes the possibility of discrimination by employers.

But there are some **prisoners** who already have these trade skills who could **teach other prisoners**. 80% of respondents said that using teachers with similar experiences as them would encourage them into learning.

Delegates suggested that **enterprises could be set up within prison** which would give offenders experience, a significant barrier to employment on release. These could bring money in by trading outside the prison and would ultimately become self sufficient.
EMPLOYMENT: THE ULTIMATE GOAL?

Learning and skills has come a long way since the Offender Learning and Skills Service was established, but participants highlighted a number of remaining issues.

Employment is the ultimate goal of learning and skills, but to get and maintain employment needs more than just learning and skills – this is one in a chain of services.

Other important factors are:

✓ Managing disclosure of a criminal record
✓ Finding appropriate housing
✓ Dealing with drug and/or alcohol dependency
✓ Achieving emotional wellbeing

The route to employment is a process and the steps along this path must be taken in the right order to ensure that employability is maximised.

Learning and skills provision is an integral part of the rehabilitation of an offender, with 80% of respondents saying that getting a qualification is either important or very important.

But employability is not only about having the necessary qualifications – it is also about being ready for employment. To be employable on release an offender needs housing, social support and emotional stability.

Before undertaking learning and skills, offenders need to address any factors that would unbalance this – including drugs and alcohol dependency.
family issues and mental health – and incarceration provides the opportunity to do this.

This process – reducing the likelihood of re-offending and increasing the chance of successful living – can be mapped as follows:

- **Address drug and alcohol dependency, emotional needs and offending behaviour**
- **Address historic barriers to learning**
- **Undertake meaningful education**
- **Obtain necessary job skills and experience**
- **Find appropriate housing**
- **Reduce likelihood of re-offending and a better chance of successful living**

"**Education is a little crack, a starting point to find out what you are capable of. When you're in jail you have a lot of thinking time**"

"**Skills in education made me learn about myself**"

"**No home equals no job**"
A CHANGE IN APPROACH – THE USER VOICE

WHY LISTEN?

This largely untapped voice highlights the reality of the situation of offender learning and skills provision and represents the only group that, from their own experiences, can:

- identify their learning and skills needs;
- highlight current systemic failings or gaps between policy and the reality for the end user; and,
- provide ideas for change.

Not only do offenders have the right to be heard, but the whole community benefits when these experiences are discussed and lessons learned from them. This group is the most qualified to evaluate current learning and skills policy, programmes and courses. We all gain when improved offender learning and skills greatly increase the chances of successful rehabilitation.

Consider the impact on the following:

- Annual cost of OLASS – £109m\(^1\)
- Estimated cost of re-offending – £13bn\(^2\)
- Savings of £130,000 per offender sentenced possible by giving prisoners life skills

Since the Offender Learning and Skills Service was established in 2006, there have been a number of studies undertaken into its effectiveness. Reports by both the National Audit Office and more recently the Public Administration Select Committee, have indicated some improvements in service provision, but have also highlighted key areas for improvement, making a number of recommendations for fundamental change.

The voice of those with experience of offender learning and skills provision is often non-existent or barely audible in these evaluations.

This series of workshops was designed to begin the process of bridging this gap.

\(^1\) Meeting Needs? The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service, National Audit Office, March 2008

\(^2\) Offender Case Management Caseload statistics 2006, Ministry of Justice, December 2007
CAPTURING THE USER VOICE

WHO?

A4e was established in Sheffield over 20 years ago to provide training and jobs for unemployed steelworkers. Since then it has developed and grown to become an international company, managing and delivering front line public services. Last year it supported 17,681 people into work, helped 10,695 people to gain a qualification, worked with 13,523 employers to improve the capability of their workforces and helped 79 third sector organisations. Whilst the size and the scope of its work has changed, the company still holds fast to its founding values of improving peoples’ lives and doing well by doing good.

A4e’s main activities include Employment & Welfare Support and Education, Skills and Advice Services. A4e is the largest Prime Contractor of New Deal services for Jobcentre Plus, as well supplying Pathways to Work and New Deal for Disabled People services. It also provides legal advice, advocacy and representation, financial capability programmes and careers advice and guidance. It delivers the Offender Learning and Skills Service in 32 prisons and its funded training services enable thousands of people across the UK to gain National Vocational Qualifications and Apprenticeships.

User Voice is a user-led charity, which transports the voice of those with experience of criminal justice into policy design and delivery, to ensure that public services are tailored to the needs of the recipient.

It was founded by Mark Johnson, a homeless drug addict and serial offender who, after rehabilitation, set up his own successful tree surgery business. He wrote a best-selling book about his life, Wasted, and pioneered The Prince’s Trust Working One to One with Young Offenders mentoring project. He is a former adviser to the National Probation Service and a consultant for policy-makers at all levels on crime, homelessness and drug abuse issues.
The term ‘user voice’ refers to people who use services voicing their opinion about those services, in this case offender learning and skills. The Public Administration Select Committee recently concluded that:

“Where deeper user involvement is both feasible and desirable we believe that the Government should provide the necessary support to enable people to participate effectively in public services. This will help ensure the right conditions for user-driven public services – and the people using them – to flourish.”

Service user groups have been conspicuous and successful in, for instance, the National Health Service. However, users of the criminal justice system have generally been excluded from the move towards empowerment, although their views can benefit society as a whole, and are as important to the design and delivery of their service as patients’ views are to the National Health Service.

The user group who took part in this series of workshops also conducted their own peer-led evaluations of the wider prison community. Delegates were able to speak openly to a small peer group without feeling judged. Many had never been asked for their views before and were helped by trained facilitators to focus on key issues to make optimal use of the available time.
HOW?

The user voice approach is unique as it is run by offenders, for offenders. It recognises the part that services providers can play, but creates an environment in which the service users are empowered to talk freely about their concerns.

The user voice workshops were held during the week commencing 3 November 2008 at HMP Channings Wood. The group of male residents were invited at random, but included a cross section of age, ethnicity and region.

Delegates were invited to an initial workshop where the aims and objectives of the event were introduced. They were given the opportunity to ask any questions and as a result of the answers those who wanted to carry out the peer-led evaluations and feed back at the second workshop put themselves forward.

These delegates were given a number of questionnaires each and asked to take them out on to the wings to canvass other residents for their views. This peer-led evaluation was the most effective way of representing a wider group of those with experience of offender learning and skills provision.

The peer representatives met between the initial introductory workshop and the main event in order to work through the questions in advance. This increased the comfort participants had with the questions and the subject matter, which made their service suggestions more relevant.
THE USER VOICE OF
LEARNING AND SKILLS
IN PRISON

is available to all at:
www.uservoice.org
www.a4e.co.uk

commissioned by:

© User Voice and A4e Ltd