

USER VOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

**A USER PERSPECTIVE
ON SERVICE PROVISION
FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS
IN MANCHESTER**

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the findings from four focus groups held with service users of Manchester Youth Offending Service (YOS). The consultations were designed and facilitated by User Voice with the aim of seeking the views of young people on the services they receive from Manchester YOS. These will be used to inform and assist the YOS in developing and planning future service delivery. Our ultimate objective is to reduce re-offending by using the insights of service users.

User Voice was founded in 2009 by Mark Johnson and is led and delivered by ex-offenders. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers hear their voices. It is well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in crime or who have direct experience of the criminal justice system as offenders and prisoners. Its work aims to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience for offenders, better criminal justice services and institutions, and more effective policy.

Context

Manchester YOS provides services for the city of Manchester. The chart below shows the numbers of formal criminal justice disposals on children and young people aged 10 to 17 in Manchester in 2009/10:¹

Order/sentence	Number
Pre court disposal	561
First tier court disposal	839
Community based order	630
Custodial sentence – detention and training order	114
Custodial sentence – section 90/92, section 228 and section 226	15
Total disposals	2159

Girls accounted for 329 of these disposals and 516 of the disposals were made on children from a BME background or of dual heritage. It is of interest to note the reduction in the numbers of disposals since 2008/9 when there were 3663. This is a reflection of the general trend in the reduction of first time entrants into the formal criminal justice system.

¹ All figures from YJB Annual Data 2009/10 – NB please note these refer to number of disposals and not to individual children; some children may have received more than one disposal during the year.

The last inspection of Manchester YOS was completed in 2009 when the YOS was rated as 'average' with a number of areas outlined for improvement, including three areas relating to re-offending.²

Methodology

The focus groups were facilitated by User Voice staff who themselves have experience of the criminal justice system; each group followed the same programme.

- Introduction: a description of User Voice; the aims of the consultation; what the participants were being asked to do and the potential impact of their participation.
- Discursive workshop: this was divided into two sessions. The first was designed to gather the young people's thoughts and experiences under the main consultation themes (please see Appendix A for questions, which were used as guidance and scene setting for the discussion and not as a strict questionnaire). The second allowed the participants to make recommendations for change based on their discussion.
- Individual interviews: facilitators identified young people who felt more comfortable in a one to one session or where they had more to contribute.

Some young people were nominated to attend by the YOS and others self selected. All the young people had the opportunity to withdraw after the introduction stage if they wished.

Thirty two young people took part. The youngest was aged 12 and the oldest was 25: all were either current or previous users of the services provided by Manchester YOS.

The four focus groups were specifically designed to involve 3 distinct groups of young people:

1. Those who **don't** engage with services
2. Those who **do** engage with services
3. Those who **have** engaged with services

This categorisation of participants is an important element that is often overlooked. Each group of young people has important information that they can give about their experiences, but some can give a greater overview than others. For example, those who have engaged and are now living successfully can describe what worked in their rehabilitation, whereas those who don't engage can give insight into why they don't but not on successful resettlement into the community. Being led by ex-offenders User Voice is able to access all of these groups, where others may struggle.

² Core Case Inspection Report. HM Inspector of Probation. 2009.
<http://www.justice.gov.uk/inspectionreports/hmi-probation/youth-offending-reports.htm> accessed 20.01.11.

As a result the following focus groups were conducted:

Don't engage	A group aged 17 and 18 all of whom were serving a custodial sentence (some for breach of a community order) at HMYOI Hindley. ³
Do engage	A group aged 12 to 17 who were all on current community based court orders supervised by the YOS.
	A group aged 15 to 18 who were also on current community based orders, most on Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Orders (ISSP).
Have engaged	A group aged 18 to 25 who had previously used services provided by Manchester YOS. This group was specifically held to allow participation by those who had no current engagement with services or opportunities to be heard.

³ HMYOI Hindley is a Prison Service establishment accommodating young men aged 15 to 17 who have been remanded or are serving a custodial sentence. It is the largest YOI in England and is the most local to Manchester YOS.

THE FINDINGS

Perceptions of what the YOS was there to do

'Help us get out of trouble by speaking to you and stuff and telling you what it's like.'

There was a universal understanding that the YOS role was to prevent offending and re-offending. Young people talked about the YOS offering a 'second chance' when they were sentenced. One group felt the YOS had a role in preventing young people from going to custody; interestingly this came from the group held in HMYOI Hindley.

'Helping you to get into things that you may like, like sports and shit.'

Some of the groups felt that the prevention of re-offending role was linked to the YOS providing opportunities, for example, drug treatment and things like introductions to leisure opportunities such as sport.

'Don't know.' 'They don't really do much.'

Feedback from the first group (12 to 17 year olds) identified some young people as either ignorant of the purpose of the YOS or a perception that the YOS didn't really have a purpose.

'To protect, and help you with any problems you have got.'

A number of the young people spoke of the YOS helping with problems, including family issues. One contributor talked about a protective role.

What the young people hoped to get out of their involvement with the YOS

The contributions to this discussion split fairly evenly in negative and positive. The two groups of current YOS service users were, on the whole, more positive about their aspirations. Those in HMYOI Hindley and the previous service user group were less positive.

'A second chance to help sort myself out, to go down the right path rather than get involved in gangs, get a job or something.'

The two groups currently on orders supervised by the YOS hoped their involvement would help them to keep out of trouble: stop using drugs; give them a second chance and help them to get a job.

'I just wanted to finish as soon as possible and off it really'

'To stop my drug taking, cocaine and that: that's what I wanted to get out of but they just didn't help.'

The group in custody and those who had previously been involved with the YOS were reflecting on previous experiences. While there was some acknowledgement that they had hoped to stay out of trouble and get a job, there was no perception that the YOS had helped or could have helped with this. There was a feeling that a YOS order was something to be got through rather than to take advantage of. Some of the older contributors did see this as a product of their youth and felt that they might make more of the opportunities now they had gained some maturity.

What's good about the YOS?

'Meet new friends and stuff.'

Many participants identified fairly concrete things as being good: trips, going boxing and go carting, free gym cards, bus passes, socialising with other young people.

'I've done courses with them and stuff like that, like anger management and that.'

'The drug groups are helpful, they ain't going to make you stop but its good that they tell you what's gonna happen if you keep taking them.'

Some of the young people recognised some of the work done to divert them from re-offending – such offending behaviour courses and victim awareness – as good. At least one participant felt that YOS authoring of court reports was good, because they could be positive and the court took them into account when sentencing.

'I honestly can't think about one good thing. I mean I was homeless at one point and all YOS was bothered about yeah... was that they had an address for them to write to me to.'

A number of the participants were unable to identify anything they saw as good about the YOS.

What's not so good about the YOS?

'You mooch all the way up there and they keep you for about five minutes, and there you are, there's your next appointment. They should just come and do a home visit.'

'I have to be there from 8 to 2.'

'They just wanna get you off their books, you know what I mean?'

The time spent on YOS appointments featured heavily in the more negative aspects of the YOS. This varied from comments about the distance young people had to travel to

keep appointments, the shortness of appointments, in some cases being unsure what the appointment was for and sometimes doing nothing when they came for the appointment.

Young people on ISSP commented on the long days they spent on this. It is not clear from the responses whether they understood that the ISSP hours were set out in the court order or whether they thought it was imposed by the YOS. Some participants acknowledged that they thought the YOS was overloaded but others expressed the view that the YOS was as eager as them for the order to end.

'You get out and they expect you to do 5 hours a day (at the YOS).'

The custodial group commented on the need to attend the YOS after the custodial section of their sentence was completed. Again it is unclear from the responses whether they understood that this was part of their sentence or something imposed by the YOS.

'People that smoke weed they give you writing: that's not gonna help you stop smoking weed is it? You're wasting your time writing on big bits of paper about weed and it doesn't stop you smoking weed.'

Many of the young people did not connect YOS appointments or courses with the things that were a problem for them. They expressed some frustration that the YOS did not seem to provide practical help with their problems.

'I don't know how to stop smoking weed but I expect my YOS worker to know to help me.'

'I just think they're a waste man, because either way, they are trained they are just pencil pushers. They ain't been on the streets'

The group of previous users aged 18 to 25 made a number of comments about the YOS not understanding what life was really like for them and that expectations were placed on them that they could not meet.

Do you think you get the help and support from the YOS to stop offending?

'Well they put like courses and all that on for you, just to keep you off the streets basically.'

A number of participants commented on the time they had to spend at the YOS or related activities as a deterrent from offending, even though they resented having to spend the time on these activities.

'It's just too many hours, if they had less hours it would be good, but you just end up breaching 'cos it's so many hours sat about waiting in the waiting room and shit.'

The issue of time spent on YOS appointments was again commented on by many young people. They expressed an understanding of the need to keep appointments for things such as education, reparation and so on but were less clear that an appointment at the YOS itself to see their worker was of any value in stopping offending.

'They can only help you so much.'

The responses indicated an understanding that the YOS alone could not stop offending but that there was some personal responsibility.

'They ask me what I do at home. That's what they ask me: what it's like at home. Weird.'

The responses to this topic included a number of discussions about communication with YOS workers and there appeared to be a division between the participants. Some young people were clear that they did not want to talk to their YOS worker about anything other than their offending behaviour or order, while others felt that the YOS should offer help with personal problems. There was an acknowledgement that some people find the personal things difficult to talk about.

What difference has the YOS made to you personally?

'The difference they made yeah, is they give me opportunities.'

Some of the participants identified positive things they thought had made a difference such as help getting a place in college or getting onto a Prince's Trust programme. One participant felt he had got a shorter custodial sentence because of the YOS involvement and others identified the authoring of court reports as the one difference made to their lives by the YOS.

'I've been with the YOS for the last three years and it hasn't made a difference, I've had no support, nothing and nothing changes apart from my age.'

Many of the young people were unable to identify any difference the YOS had made to their lives.

If you were in charge of the YOS what things would you want to change and why?

'The offences they've committed, I'd make sure there was programmes put in place for that person around the crime that they have committed so that they can learn about the consequences.'

'Drug courses and that: they had me doing drug courses and that and I'd never been in trouble over drugs in my life.'

A number of the participants commented on the 'one size fits all' approach they perceived as being in place. They expressed the view that more one-to-one work and intervention relevant to the offence they have committed would be beneficial. There was also a view that the programmes were sometimes 'out of date', they had been running for some time and didn't take account of things that had changed.

'If you want to be a brickie or summat, go and build a wall in a communal garden you know what I mean? Something that's going to help the community as well as you.'

Young people felt there was not a wide enough range of activities on offer, particularly in regard to reparation. There was a view that some of these were demeaning and did not help them to gain any skills or stop offending: one example given was litter picking.

'They should ask you what you want to do, what you wanna achieve and that, and obviously work towards that.'

The view was expressed that the work done by the YOS as part of an order was sometimes a bit ad hoc. Young people expressed the view that they would like to have some sort of action plan, worked out with them. They also commented on the perceived inflexibility: they were expected to give up their time, be punctual and so on but that it was always on the YOS terms, with no recognition that their lives were sometimes chaotic and no allowances made for this.

'Do something in the community. Instead of meeting like this, like go and meet in the park or something and do something constructive.'

'I mean in a little room like this, you get worked up.'

Many of the participants felt that too much of their contact was based in the YOS offices and that this was not always helpful. They wanted to see YOS workers be more prepared to work with them in areas and localities where they might usually be, their own 'territory' so to speak.

What skills and qualities should a YOS worker have?

'Obviously they don't know what you've been through and that.'

'They don't have chaos in the streets they live in.'

The issue of the lack of understanding of YOS workers of the reality of the young people's lives was again prominent in the responses in this discussion. Young people perceived YOS workers as being middle class and not living in the same areas as the young people. Even where workers lived in the same areas, there was a view that they did not have the same experiences or understanding of the issues for the young people.

Many young people felt that some YOS workers have expectations of their behaviour without understanding how difficult it was for some of them to meet these.

'They try and help you out and that, you know what I mean, try and give you a lift with whatever'

'You want someone who is gonna put the right things in place for you.'

YOS workers who were willing to 'go the extra mile' were clearly seen as effective: these were those who the young people felt understood what they needed and who they saw as having a real interest in their welfare. Young people wanted to feel that their YOS worker had a genuine interest in them and a passion for the job they were doing, focussed on practical help and not 'box ticking'.

'Not to palm you off with the duty officer.'

Consistency was seen as an important quality in a YOS worker. The young people wanted the same worker who they felt really knew them and hadn't just read their file.

'I want them to listen.'

Good communication skills were seen as crucial. YOS workers who listen and consult were highly rated while those that the young people perceive as just telling them what to do were not.

'No peer supporters that have criminal backgrounds. They're all fucking students, they don't know shit.'

Participants expressed a strong view that input from people who had similar experiences would be valuable. At least one young person gave an example of Manchester Against Gangs: he respected this project because former gang members were involved and he felt they understood some of the pressures associated with gang life.

'Don't tell lies.'

Honesty was seen as crucially important in building trust. Young people showed an understanding of the time limitations of their statutory involvement with the YOS but felt that a worker needed to be honest, trustworthy and supportive; to be able to engage with them quickly but not expect them to be immediate 'best friend'.

'Yeah someone to talk to who will be able to listen to you and understand what you're saying and like basically not judge you.'

Young people expressed the view they did not want YOS workers to be judgemental. They commented on workers who knew what crimes they had committed but who did not regard them as lesser beings because of that. They demonstrated an understanding that YOS workers could not condone their offending but wanted people who did not define them by their criminal behaviour.

'You don't want to talk to someone and think they are listening to you and really they are thinking you horrible bastard.'

What incentive would help you complete your order?

'A guaranteed job'

'A goal to work to.'

'Things for us to do to make us not re-offend and not go to jail.'

Young people recognised the importance of some sort of purposeful activity to assist them in completing their order, in particular a job or some sort of relevant training. There were mixed views about unpaid work, some seeing the value in the long term but others feeling this was not something they should be asked to do unless part of a court order.

There was also a clear view that they needed a well thought out plan for their order, that had been worked out with them and that would provide them with skills that would carry on after YOS involvement.

'Gym membership.'

Many young people saw practical things as offering incentives including money and driving lessons, which were seen as something that could help with employment opportunities. There was some acknowledgment that some of these were not in remit of the YOS.

'Realistically they can't even afford to buy new pens so they are not gonna give us money.'

'Say you was on tag now yeah? And say you come in Monday to Friday and that, they should give you a little leeway on your tag, like, say Saturday night you can go out or something like that.'

As with some of the other comments, it is unclear whether the young people understand the remit of the YOS in relation to variation of orders made by the court. Nevertheless, this is included as many of the young people commented on the lack of flexibility or perceived lack of flexibility by YOS staff.

What's good about the way the YOS helps you with your order?

'My YOS workers are both alright, they try to be a bit flexible'

'He's just some daft shit my age; I don't want to talk to him.'

The responses to this discussion area were very focused around relationships with individual workers. This was seen as the most important component in the effectiveness of help given by the YOS, a good worker was perceived as making a real difference. Comments again focussed on workers who would listen, be flexible and who young people perceived as being there for them. There was also a view that young people should have some say in the choice of worker and be able to change if really could not get on with their allocated worker.

Was there anything you didn't like about the way the YOS oversaw your order?

'They speak down to you.'

The issue of respect and attitude was a focus in these responses. Young people wanted the YOS to treat them with respect and talk to them in an open way and be non judgemental.

Name one thing you would change in the system

Some clear themes emerged including:

- More resources in the wider system. Young people talked about the need for more youth activities and help with employment.
- Modernisation: the group of young people currently in custody felt the system was outdated and needed a thorough review.
- Relevance and experience: there was a clear view that people who hold power – at both a governmental and local YOS level – were remote from the real lives of young offenders and that there was a need for them to proactively seek their views and listen to them. There was an appetite for more involvement from people who had shared similar lives and experiences to act as peer supporters or provide guidance.
- Incentives: more recognition of when young people were doing well and had achieved something, however small.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general the young people participating in this consultation understood the role of the YOS and recognised some of the limitations; they also acknowledged that they had some personal responsibility to make the most of the help offered to them to stop offending. The exception to this was the first group (those aged 12 to 17) where some young people were unclear as to the role and purpose.

The feedback indicated three main areas of concern where changes or improvements might be made:

Relationships

The relationships and attitudes of individual workers are key to good engagement. Active listening skills, empathy, a non judgemental attitude and honesty about the nature of the relationship between worker and young person should be the basis for the supervision of orders. Young people also need to feel that those they are engaging with understand the realities of their lives.

Recommendation 1

The YOS should consider undertaking a skills audit and any relevant training to ensure that active listening skills are embedded across the team

Recommendation 2

The YOS should ensure that recruitment processes for peer supporters and other volunteers maximises the opportunity for ex offenders to be recruited. They may wish to consider training and supporting their own service users to undertake these roles.

Recommendation 3

If not already in place, the YOS might wish to consider training and supporting service users to be involved in the recruitment and selection of staff.

Interventions

The interventions provided as part of any order need to be seen by the young person as relevant and part of an overall plan with worked-out short and longer term realistic targets and individual goals. Young people need to feel that the process is a two-way one, and with the expectations on both them and the supervisor clearly laid out. The purpose of any intervention, including appointments with supervisors need to be clear and not seen as just a 'tick box' exercise.

Recommendation 4

The YOS should consider where interventions take place and whether there are more opportunities for these to be community-based.

Recommendation 5

All Order plans should be reviewed to ensure they are clear, with the purpose of interventions spelt out and the expectations of both young person and supervisor included.

Recommendation 6

The YOS should consider reviewing their offending behaviour and other courses to ensure that they are up to date and relevant to the offending behaviour of the individuals placed on them.

Communication and expectations

As the YOS is the deliverer of the court order, the relationship of the YOS to individual young people is one of power and authority and it may be difficult for young people to understand where this power originates. There needs to be clarity about which requirements are those absolutely imposed by the order and those where the YOS may exercise some discretion, and under what circumstances this discretion would be exercised. The role and purpose of the YOS intervention needs to be consistently and constantly reinforced.

Recommendation 7

The YOS case audit system should include a check that the role and purpose of interventions is reinforced at regular intervals, particularly for first time users of the service.

Recommendation 8

Case managers in the YOS should have a shared understanding of areas where discretion and flexibility may be exercised, and under what circumstances (within National Standards and Case Management Guidelines) and ensure that this is communicated to all service users.

Recommendation 9

The YOS should set up a structure across all its teams for ongoing engagement so that young people are able to voice their opinions and enable service provision to continually reflect their ever evolving needs.

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