

USER
VOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN
STOP RE - OFFENDING



SUMMARY OF YOUNG OFFENDERS'
INSIGHTS INTO TACKLING
YOUTH CRIME AND ITS CAUSES

USER VOICE

User Voice's work is led and delivered by ex-offenders who foster dialogue between users and providers of the criminal justice and related services. Our primary aim is to enable practitioners and policy makers to listen directly to service users, allowing unheard voices to make a difference.

The entrenched exclusion and complex needs of some of the people we work with can be a huge obstacle to service providers. While User Voice aims to be a powerful advocate on behalf of ex-offenders and others on the margins, it does this through robust but constructive engagement with those who have the power to design services and make decisions. Our aim is to act as a 'referee': ensuring that no one group's agenda dominates and that engagement benefits all.

We are well placed to gain the trust of people involved in crime. The involvement of ex-offenders has many benefits, not least of which is the narrative of success. Working with ex-offenders can be a powerful way of motivating people who have little self-belief that they can overcome the barriers they face. We recruit qualified and talented ex-offenders. This has a profound impact on employees' self-confidence and transforms their long-term employment prospects. User Voice demonstrates the hugely positive role ex-offenders can play given the right chance.

History

User Voice was founded by Mark Johnson, an ex-offender and former drug abuser, best-selling author of *Wasted* and social commentator.¹ Mark's experiences of prison, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and consultant within the criminal justice system and voluntary sector, convinced him of the need to create a

¹ M Johnson. *Wasted*. Sphere 2007.

model of engagement that is fair and incentive led. His aim was to foster dialogue between service providers and users, which results in better and more cost-effective services.

What do we do?

- **User Voice councils** that can be developed for use within prisons or in the community for probation, youth offending teams and related services.
- **Bespoke consultations:** User Voice works with clients to design projects aimed at accessing, hearing and acting upon the insights of those who are hardest to reach, including prisoners, ex-offenders and those at risk of crime. These projects include staff and user consultations, workshops and research.
- **Advocacy:** we present the models, practices and business case behind User Voice in order to inspire and influence key audiences. We create opportunities for the people we work with to meet and speak to those in power.

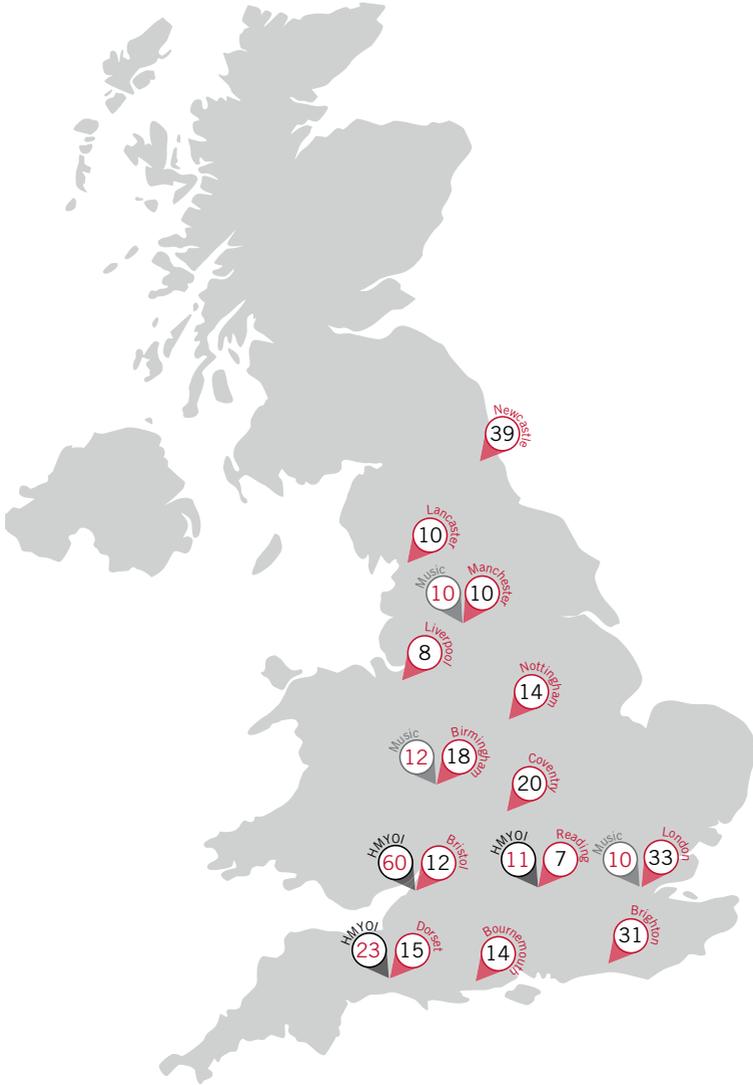
“**Something that happened you're just gonna remember it and if you don't talk to no-one about it, it's gonna stay there and the drugs make you forget about everything.**

SAUL, MIDLANDS

User Voice received charitable status in 2010. In its short life it has completed a number of projects and established a strong reputation. This includes: creating new prison councils involving staff and prisoners; work with veterans, and consultations on skills and employment, drug and alcohol services, social services and probation.

In 2011 User Voice will undertake new projects including work with foreign nationals and women in prison, a social enterprise initiative and community councils. User Voice works with a range of age groups, but much of its activity to date has been with those under the age of 25.

Figure 1: the User Voice Excluded Youth Project consultation sites



INTRODUCTION

This short paper attempts to summarise the second and final report of User Voice's Excluded Youth Project.² The project was launched in summer 2010. Since then we have undertaken 22 discussion groups in six regions with 325 of the most marginalised young people in England. We also conducted a survey, which was completed by 582 excluded young people between the ages of 12 and 27. This provides important information about the young people involved:

- A fifth had received 10 or more different types of sentence.
- 43% had spent time in a young offenders' institution or prison.
- 45% said they had drink/drug problems.
- 16% said they had experienced mental health problems.
- 17% of participants had been in care at some stage.
- Less than a third had only experienced living with both their parents while growing up.
- Nearly one in 10 (9%) had never lived with either parent.
- 71% had been excluded from school.
- Just under a third had been tested at some stage for learning difficulties.

“ If there was a job for a drug worker, why give it to a guy who's took paracetamol do you know what I mean? Give it to a guy who's been on drugs and come off drugs and then he can tell ya: I've took drugs, this is how I come off it. This is my experience.

MICHAEL, NORTH WEST

² <http://www.whatsyourstory.userservice.org/news/final-report>

The project has revealed staggering levels of system failure: most of the young people reported that there had been no interventions to help them cope as children with problems like parental violence and neglect. Their experiences of most agencies had been poor and social workers and the police in particular were regarded with deep negativity.

“My boss tried to be a support for me, but at first I didn’t get it, as I don’t trust anyone. Growing up I thought he was a fed: why is he watching me? So, I didn’t talk to him. It took a while for me to realise he is not. I slowly built up respect for him. He is one of only probably five people in that I trust.

BOB, SOUTH EAST

User Voice’s purpose was however never simply to restate these problems but to provide an opportunity for service providers and users to work together in designing solutions. Our final report aimed to build on our interim findings, published at the end of 2010, and to reflect the discussions that took place between 30 of the young people – nominated by their peers – and 25 policy makers, including MPs and representatives from the Ministry of Justice, National Offender Management Service, the London Probation Service, the Youth Justice Board and private contractors currently managing prisons.

For most of the young people involved, the only thing that’s known about them is their criminal record. Their willingness to engage shows that they can and want to make a positive contribution. They also want to place their offending in this context: the violence, deprivation, poverty and exclusion of their childhoods. Many want to express their anger. At User Voice ex-offenders help young people to talk about their lives, to express their views and to articulate their hopes and fears.

This summary includes just a few quotes from those involved. The full report sought to share their stories.³ While all are unique in their way, what is striking is how often the same issues arise. Most of these young people started life on the margins: their experiences do not represent those of a cross section of the population but the result of generational poverty, exclusion and deprivation. For many, this project has been the first time anyone has asked them how they can contribute to breaking this cycle. For most it is the only time someone has listened.

³ All names and locations have been changed to protect identity.

Table 1: User Voice's Excluded Youth Project

**User Voice engages young people in designing survey.
582 young people complete questionnaires.**

**Young people nominate participants in
regional discussion groups.**

User Voice facilitates, trains and supports 325 young people take part in regional discussion groups:

North East (39)	3 x Newcastle (39)
North West (28)	Lancaster (10) Liverpool (8) Manchester (10)
Midlands (52)	Birmingham (18) Coventry (20) Nottingham (14)
London/South East (82)	2 x Brighton (31) Forest Gate (8) Hackney (7) HMYOI Reading (11) Islington (9) Reading (7) South London (9)
South West (124)	Bournemouth (14) Bristol (12) Dorset (15) HMYOI Ashfield, Bristol (60) HMYOI Portland, Dorset (23)

Young people attending forums nominate 30 peers to attend policy discussion.

User Voice provides support, personal development and speaker training.

Young people engage through Facebook, and through three music workshops where they rap and write about their experiences. London (10) Birmingham (12) Manchester (10)

30 young people and 25 policy makers and senior representatives from the criminal justice services discuss responses to youth crime and develop ideas for solutions.



THE PROJECT

The Excluded Youth project is the latest in a series of ex-offender led consultations undertaken by User Voice and is its largest to date. It has three objectives.

1. To undertake a major user-led consultation with young people, about their experiences, youth justice services and the causes of youth crime.
2. To make sure that the views and voices of these young people are captured and shared with practitioners and policy makers.
3. To work with peer-nominated participants to develop some of the young people's ideas.

“I would make it possible for young people to have access to a counsellor or some kind of therapist because a lot of my problems started from when I was a child and I saw things a young person should not. Do you know how many youths have been sexually abused? It seems like there is no one we can trust to talk about these things, it would help if we knew we could go to someone who would listen and not judge us.

KAMAL, SOUTH WEST

Three broad questions underpinned our consultation design:

- What factors do young people identify as triggering their offending behaviour and entry into the criminal justice system?
- What is the impact and experience of youth justice services from young people's perspectives? What works, what doesn't and why?
- What could have been done to avoid them getting into trouble and what solutions can young people suggest to prevent re-offending?

PARTICIPANTS

- In total 582 young people filled in the questionnaires. Some 534 told us how old they were and of these: 19 were between the ages of 12 and 14; 202 were aged 15 to 17 (38%), 290 (54%) were aged 18 to 24 and 23 were aged 25 to 27. Of those who specified their gender (550), 450 (82%) were male and 100 were female. This is reflective of the broader make up of the secure estate.
- A total of 542 people filled in the information about ethnicity: 333 (61%) are white and 209 (39%) are from black and ethnic minority groups of which 118 (22%) described themselves as black, 64 (12%) said dual heritage/mixed race, 24 (4%) said Asian and 3 (1%) said Chinese/other. Again this is broadly in line with the national profile of young offenders.
- A total of 504 participants answered the question about disability with 38 (8%) saying they had a disability. Asked about mental health, 96 of the total 582 participants (16%) said they had experienced mental health problems.
- Taking into account that 68 of the 582 participants could not be categorized in terms of where they lived, for example because they were interviewed in custody, of the rest (514) over a third (184) were living in London, 112 (22%) in the North West, 84 (16%) in the South West, 50 (10%) in the South East, 46 (9%) in the Midlands and 38 (7%) in the North East.

- Many participants reported very difficult issues around family. However, 380 (65%) of survey respondents said they had a happy home life, while 202 (35%) said no or did not answer. The latter group was significantly less likely to have attended school regularly (38% compared to 63% of those who said they had a happy home life). They were more likely to have had a problem with drink or drugs when they got into trouble (57% compared to 38%) and more likely to have ever been excluded from school (75% compared to 69%).
- A total of 100 (17%) of participants had been in care at some stage. A fifth had been through some kind of upheaval in their living arrangements. A small number (2%) had grown up only in a children's home or in foster care. Less than a third (27%) of participants had only experienced living with both their parents when they were growing up and nearly one in 10 (over 9%) had never lived with either parent when growing up.
- The vast majority were from poor families and lived in deprived areas. Many believed that had they had wealthier parents or lived in another area, they would have been less likely to commit crime. The desire for goods and lack of money was cited repeatedly as a contributing factor to getting into trouble.
- The most common causes of crime identified by those young people (494) who responded to this question in our survey and who gave a sole cause were drugs and/or alcohol and peers (both 19%). All but 8% (48) of the young people we spoke to had received a sentence of one kind or another. A fifth of the participants had received 10 or more different types of sentence.

METHODS

Between June and November 2010, User Voice engaged with nearly 600 young people (see Table 1). The criteria for inclusion were: young people aged 12-27 with experience of criminal justice services or those at risk of offending. As far as we are aware, this consultation is unique in England in combining a user-led approach on this scale, with this group, across nation wide geographic locations.

The combination of survey work and qualitative approaches has enabled us to gather both 'hard' data, while unearthing 'softer' rich and in-depth accounts of young people's first-hand experiences. To gather and report accurately, the full range of responses, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches were chosen: this enabled us to undertake a comprehensive survey of a significant sample and gather rich, spontaneous and in-depth descriptions of young peoples' experiences.

“You're the first person that I've met that does this sort of thing. I think it's amazing. It means someone to look up to. It's something that's gonna give me the courage to do better, its meeting you. Because you have turned your life around and if you can do it, anyone can.

RORY, NORTH EAST

Principles

The sensitive nature of this consultation demanded a robust set of principles. User Voice has developed these through consultation projects with young people. They underpin our work alongside our safeguarding policies and include making it clear to young people they can cease to be involved at any time without reason or recourse.

- **Participant choice:** User Voice facilitators only engage with young people who have chosen to participate in the consultation and they are supported to decide what and how they disclose. Participants can disengage from the consultation at any time, without reason or recourse.
- **User and peer-led:** service users put themselves forward for questionnaires and attend events. They also nominate others to do the same and to represent them.
- **Respect for the individual:** young people have a right to be heard and respected and everything they say will be considered as a valid and valuable form of evidence.
- **Equal opportunities:** we will endeavor to ensure that those from diverse or marginal communities are represented and heard.
- **Commitment to change:** we believe one of the key reasons for undertaking consultation is that the insights gained from the lived experiences of participants can be used to inform future service planning, implementation and evaluation.
- **Transparency and accountability:** being open, clear and accountable to all stakeholders (staff, young people and funders) creates the ground for trust building and solution focused approaches.
- **Confidentiality:** we will assure those that choose to participate that they will not be personally identified in the report, unless they choose to be.

Consultation Team

Throughout the project User Voice's aim has been to help young people overcome their fears about sharing, provide clear reasons for engaging and ensure their safety. Trust building, making connections through sharing appropriately and creating rapport are central to removing barriers to engaging hard to reach groups.

User Voice team members were selected because of their first hand experience of criminal justice services. As well as all being ex-offenders (experts through experience) our integrated professional skills included:

- Extensive community work and development with young and vulnerable groups.
- Professional health and social care experience, research and service management.
- Professional counselling, psycho-therapeutic and group facilitation skills.

“They’re quite solution focused – it’s not just moaning and groaning, they’re really coming up with ideas for change. I’ve been really impressed by these young people who are prepared to stand up, tell their stories and come up with solutions. It’s so important to listen to young offenders and we don’t do enough of that in probation.

HEATHER MUNRO, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE LONDON PROBATION TRUST

Process

The consultation began with a mapping exercise of a range of community and criminal justice services undertaken throughout five regions: South West, South East, Midlands, North West and North East. Services included: Youth Offending Teams, Probation Services, Young Offender Institutions and voluntary/statutory sector provision such as youth centres and education/learning trusts.

Contact was made with the lead member of staff in each service and we used our existing networks and relationships with senior managers, to gain access. We approached the organisations that we had mapped. We sent those services that agreed to participate an information pack containing details of the consultation and an advert and posters were placed in visible areas for young people to see. A good incentive advertised on the poster was the possibility of receiving a free Nokia mobile phone with credit from our sponsor T- Mobile.

Data was collected from interviews, questionnaires, semi-structured focus groups and diary reflections from facilitators. To provide the best coverage we took into consideration the type of service or institution, demographics and geography.

“You’re constantly blown away with their insight, intelligence and sensitivity, which is at odds with how we tend to stereotype them. As decision makers we don’t expose ourselves enough to the views of the people who use our services. It’s very easy to isolate ourselves from the views of the people in the system and yet their experience is at least as, if not more, important.

JOHN DREW, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

Questionnaire design

A steering group was assembled and planning meetings were focused on developing the questions for focus groups. Drawing on our extensive experience of criminal justice services, we constructed a pilot questionnaire that covered the areas of interest (causes, experiences of services and solutions). The questions were clear and allowed considerable space for young people to spontaneously elaborate. As we undertook the focus groups our learning about what worked well evolved and this enabled us to make progressive changes to the questionnaire⁴ to optimise the depth and range of qualitative responses.

4 <http://whatsyourstory.uservoice.org/the-story-so-far>

Semi structured focus groups

We integrated a key element of our existing user involvement model into the process. Our aim was to help young people overcome their fears about sharing, provide clear reasons for engaging and ensure their safety during the consultation. Trust building, making connections through sharing appropriately and creating rapport are central to our model: the aim is to remove the huge barriers that exist because participants can see that those undertaking the consultation have literally walked in their shoes.

Our facilitators engaged and supported the participants where necessary: the key aim was to maximise individual expression and ensure that they were not led or biased by anyone. Although the workshops were structured, there were opportunities to improvise and be creative: each involved interactive discussions and our aim was to ensure that participants felt involved, validated and valued. Facilitators adapted to each group and pursued lines of enquiry that flowed with the group as well as uncovering as much depth and range as possible.

Selection by peers

The 30 young people or 'reps' who attended the final event in London were nominated by their peers and were given one-to-one support including:

- **Personal development plans**, which looked at their goals, aspirations and needs in short and long term (in relation to this project and more broadly);
- **Sign-posting** to other organisations for help where needed;
- **Skills and training**, including providing further details about the project, its context and themes, two public speaking training sessions and one on what being a representative meant.

- **Open Space training** and planning sessions on the approach to be used on the day and the role that ‘reps’ would be expected to play; and
- **Individual support and coaching** around specific concerns that arose including fear about travelling to London and meeting with senior officials.

“**I didn't have anyone to talk to, there was a lot of violence at home and I couldn't stop it or tell anyone, I was smoking weed and drinking with my friends, maybe if someone had helped me, I would not be here now.**

KEITH, SOUTH WEST

Open Space

The policy discussion held at Westminster in December 2010 included young people from around the country, alongside policy makers and senior practitioners from across the criminal justice system. Mark Johnson opened the session, setting out the context of discussions. This was followed by some of the young people from each region sharing their experiences and what they hoped to discuss.

User Voice used the Open Space method for holding meetings based on self-organisation.⁵ Open Space events focus on one central question. In this instance it was: *How can we work together to reduce youth crime?* Other than this, there is no set agenda. Instead participants, through a series of sessions facilitated by User Voice staff – and informed by young people's earlier engagement in regional workshops – identified the key issues they wished to discuss. The process is designed to encourage participation and equality of engagement. User Voice chose this route because the Open Space approach seemed appropriate in engaging this group, many of who are not used to traditional meetings.

⁵ For more information: www.openspaceworld.org

HARD TO HEAR?

Throughout the day participants filtered what they choose to discuss through what Open Space calls 'dot democracy': voting on the issues and ideas they believe are most important. We have tried to summarise the key issues that came up throughout the project and identify the recommendations that were prioritized for action. For full details please see User Voice's final report.⁶

Social Services

Strong angry feelings emerged when social services were discussed with many young people describing their experiences as disempowering and/or pointless.

Many of the young people associated their involvement with feeling threatened or coerced and with psychological devastation. Some had experienced being removed from their families and homes without sufficient explanation and/or choice or they feared this happening.

- **Recommendation:** User Voice is developing proposals for a different approach aimed at reaching more children and young people. This will explore how we can offer those whose behaviour brings them to schools' or other services' attention with therapeutic support involving adults (including ex-offenders).

Education

The majority of the young people involved in this project had been excluded from school and many had been tested for learning difficulties, were dyslexic and/or had been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder. A minority said they had received help for problems of behaviour or attendance at school.

⁶ <http://www.whatsyourstory.uservice.org/news/final-report>

- **Recommendation:** The high percentage of exclusion from schools was startling. While we do not pretend that these young people are not disruptive, schools can play a more proactive role in triggering discussions around what lies behind young people's behaviour and explore the positive role that therapeutic support and the engagement of ex-offenders can play.
- **Recommendation:** Those local authorities diverting resources away from youth services should seek to engage excluded young people as a priority.

“**I came here today and I knew no-one. But here we are sitting around in a circle and we are united.**

DISCUSSION FORUM PARTICIPANT

Employment

Many of the young people were unemployed when they got into trouble. None of the young people reported any positive or helpful experiences about Jobcentre Plus. Views about Connexions were more mixed, with some young people reporting positive experiences about their engagement.

- **Recommendation:** The creation of a user-led national employment agency specialising in helping ex-addicts and ex-offenders to secure work coupled with incentives for employers and education providers who take on ex-offenders. While there are some projects already providing these services, their coverage is limited and none of the young people involved here were aware of their existence.

- **Recommendation:** Review the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 to help ex-offenders access employment or education. User Voice hopes that the forthcoming changes to justice services mentioned in the government's recent Green Paper, *Breaking the Cycle*,⁷ seek to strike a better balance between risks and employment, with particular focus on giving young people a fresh start and on proportionality.

Housing

Those young people who were or had experienced homelessness talked about feeling extremely vulnerable. When hostels were discussed they were often seen as dangerous places, giving examples of offending behaviour.

- **Recommendation:** Greater flexibility on hostel rules, more support and advice available within hostels in dealing with past experiences and in securing future housing.

Drug and Alcohol Services

A significant minority of those involved had drug or alcohol problems. Some reported that there was an emphasis on stressing the bad side of drugs without any opportunities to engage them in coming off drugs. Several highlighted that agencies were not geared up to engage people who were using cannabis.

Recommendation: The Department of Health, working with local agencies needs to develop drug intervention services and treatment specifically for young people.

⁷ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/breaking-cycle-071210.htm>

Police

Of all agencies explored, the police aroused the most anger. Many felt that engagement with the police often meant being threatened and some said they had been assaulted. When identifying desired changes, participants wanted action around improving dialogue, communication and mutual respect. They stressed that this must include tackling stereotyping, harassment and physical abuse.

- **Recommendation:** The young people involved showed considerable interest in expanding the opportunities available for excluded young people and the police to work together in tackling local crime, in particular improving community relations, stop and search procedures and gang culture.
- **Recommendation:** There should be visible measures to tackle police brutality and accessible ways for young people to make complaints about abuse.

Young Offenders' Institutions and Prisons

Most of the young people held very negative views and saw these institutions as 'lock ups' without any support or opportunities for rehabilitation or progression. Bullying and some traumatic and violent experiences were identified as an issue. Prisons were seen by some of those involved as less violent than young offenders' institutions. Nonetheless generally young people felt that prison does not work or would not work for them.

- **Recommendation:** The government should as part of its focus on rehabilitation and review of sentencing, introduce a duty for courts and other relevant agencies to ensure that children are involved in sentencing procedure, that their views are listened to. When a parent receives a custodial sentence, this should trigger available support to children and young people including

providing someone to talk to. Throughout the sentence families should have one person they can raise issues with around visits, support needs and resettlement. With the right training, support and checks, ex-offenders are well placed to provide this service.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

Of the total survey participants, 347 had at some point had a youth offending worker assigned to them. Improvements suggested included more flexibility, particularly on the issue of breaching orders and a greater range of meaningful options. Many suggested the need to improve trust, make improvements to how YOTs communicated with young people and the introduction of peer mentors who were ex-offenders.

Probation Services

Over a third (36%) or 207, of the young people involved had had a probation officer. The young people who were unsatisfied gave a range of reasons that included: not being given enough time, probation services having too many people to engage with and being looked down on. In terms of changes and improvements young people asked for more leniency with recalls, changes to the system and the way staff work so that they had more time and greater consistency with one worker.

Multi-agency

Throughout the project, in every region and in relation to every public service discussed, young people raised the issue of not being listened to. Young people did not feel they had a voice or that people had the time, capability or empathy to understand and to listen to what they had to say.

- **Recommendation:** Excluded young people should be given more opportunity to feed back on the services that seek to address their offending. This is more not less important as public spending cuts impact on services. Local justice agencies need to work together in developing more effective feedback procedures and in enabling excluded youth to play a collective role in relation to justice services. This needs to implicate them in the process of success (and failure).

SUPPORTED BY



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