

**USER  
VOICE**

**ONLY OFFENDERS CAN  
STOP RE - OFFENDING**

**HIDDEN VOICES:  
What Young People think about  
'Transforming Youth Custody'**

**A service user response to Transforming Youth Custody:  
Putting education at the heart of detention**

**APRIL 2013**



## INTRODUCTION

This response documents the feedback gathered during a series of service user led focus groups undertaken by User Voice. The aim of these was to engage young people and record their reactions to the Government's proposed changes to the education of young people in custody. As a result of these sessions several themes were identified which are presented here in the form of a series of recommendations. Few can provide better insight into these matters than the service users themselves. As such, the views contained in this response are particularly valuable because they come directly from the young people who will be affected by these changes. The Government now recognises that the current 'University of Crime' in which young people become enrolled when given a custodial sentence does not work. It fails in almost every way to help and rehabilitate those it comes into contact with and provides the antithesis to the support offenders actually need to overcome the barriers that prevent them turning their lives around. In response, the planned reforms seek to introduce 'Secure Colleges' to the youth estate. It is intended that these will have 'education at their heart' and will equip young offenders with the skills and qualifications, self-respect and self-discipline to turn their backs on crime for good. The intention is that young people should return to the community more focussed on and engaged with the opportunities that an improved education has made available to them.

The service user response to this consultation paper suggests that the plans to improve education in custody could ultimately have a positive impact on reoffending. However, in order to effectively achieve this, it is essential that there is clear links between the education provided in prison and the community. The improved continuity of such an approach will make prisoners better prepared for release. User Voice understands that the period young service users spend in custody provides an opportunity to educate and up-skill them while away from the negative influences in their outside life. By utilising this time productively they have the best possible chance on release. To achieve this, an initial robust assessment of individual needs and understanding is vital to enable positive progression both in custody and afterwards through the gate.

User Voice specialises in service user engagement. This is currently being promoted across criminal justice services. It recognises that many offenders and ex-offenders have invaluable insights to offer on the causes of crime, the effectiveness of the system, and the barriers to successful resettlement that result in failure to prevent significant numbers from desisting from future offending. Traditionally, this unique knowledge has been undervalued, unexplored and unheard. In contrast, this response reiterates the benefits of engaging service users in the services that affect their lives and their path to rehabilitation. By allowing the people who have experience of youth custody to voice their opinions and perspectives we are ultimately facilitating the shaping and development of improved services for all.

## Engaging service users

---

Listening to service users to improve public services is not a new concept. In fact, it is now commonplace. There is now broad recognition that effective user engagement can help to improve services and their outcomes by:

- identifying their needs;
- highlighting current systemic failings or gaps between provision and the reality for the end user; and
- providing ideas for change.

The entrenched exclusion of many service users is often a huge obstacle to service providers. User Voice specialises in connecting with excluded individuals and motivating them to engage in consultations. This ensures that practitioners and policy-makers hear the voices of the most marginalised groups within the criminal justice system. During its work, User Voice has consistently found that offenders want to talk to people who have 'walked in their shoes'. This is why all User Voice frontline staff across its prison, youth, probation and mental health projects are ex-service users with first-hand experience of the system. It is this collective understanding that makes User Voice uniquely able to build trust and ultimately gain access to these groups.

## User Voice

---

User Voice is distinctive because its work 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. User Voice 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. For its youth projects, User Voice recruits talented and caring staff trained in youth engagement and youth justice. As the team is youth-centred in its ethos it is highly effective in engagement with the most excluded groups of young people. Ultimately, the aim is to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience, better youth justice services and institutions, and more effective policy.

In order to achieve this, the following services are delivered:

- User Voice Councils: that can be developed for use within prisons or in the community for probation, youth offending teams and other related services, providing a mechanism for service users to be heard in an organised, sustained and replicable way.
- Bespoke consultations: where 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.
- Peer mentoring: to engage service users in peer support programmes to reduce re-offending.

User Voice has established 8 Prison Councils, 13 Community (Probation) Councils and 3 Youth Councils and currently represents the voices of around 15% of criminal justice service users, having engaged with over 5,000 in the past 4 years.

There is growing evidence of the impact of this innovative approach. The User Voice Council model was initially piloted and evaluated in the 3 sites of HM Prison Isle of Wight in 2009 and resulted in a 37% reduction in prisoner complaints and a fall in the use of segregation from 160 days to 47 days. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis was also undertaken on this pilot by KPMG which identified a SROI ratio of £2.11 of value created for every £1 invested.

## Consultation process

---

User Voice was able to collect first-hand service user experiences and input because it is engaged with hundreds of young people throughout multiple projects across the country. These include Youth Councils in HMYOI Aylesbury, Southwark YOS, Tower Hamlets YOS, consultations in Bradford YOT, Leeds YOS, the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, and collaborations with John Moores University Social Science Festival and Positive Steps Oldham.

In order to gain a service user response to the proposed changes to custodial youth education User Voice held a series of focus group sessions with young individuals with experience of youth custody. These participants were drawn from several of

User Voice's current youth projects. The focus groups followed a series of predefined questions based on some those outlined in the Ministry of Justice's Transforming Youth Custody consultation paper (2013: 27-28). The focus group questions were designed to engage the service users and encourage them to analyse what impact the proposals would have and the pros/cons of this. The main themes identified in the feedback are presented together below.

## SERVICE USER RESPONSE

### Transforming youth justice

---

None of the participants had any prior knowledge of the proposed changes to youth custody. However, after a description of the proposals was given, most welcomed the possible introduction of consistent, sustained and worthwhile training schemes in youth custody and their educational infrastructure. Although there were some who felt that no amount of education would help those determined to offend:

*"I don't think it would help. If someone is going to commit crime they are going to do it anyway, no matter what."*

The majority recognised the benefits of education and welcomed the prospect of improved teaching in custody and beyond. For these individuals there was a clear link between adequate qualifications/training, employment and the risk of reoffending.

*"It would give us a chance to develop skills that we might not have had before they were in jail. This guy couldn't read or write when he went into jail, but during his time in jail he was able to develop those skills. So it can help."*

*"If you have something to do and something to go for and focus on, it could stop you going out and committing crimes."*

*"It would keep them confident and occupied."*

*"I know people that when they come out, they come out with a degree. If they do catering, they can come out with a catering degree, if they do business they can come out with one of them. Obviously they can use that time that they're in there to make something out of it. If they do the course and they come out, they can try to get themselves a job in that category. Rather than staying in there for three years and sitting there and doing nothing, you gain no qualifications, then you come out and you have to re-do everything again, like go to college, that is just a waste of life."*

*"What the government should try to do is to get people into work so it can benefit them and benefit the country and benefit the person themselves. Nobody wants to live on £50 a week."*

### Training and courses

---

In **Question C** of this consultation, the Government aim to understand how the educational balance might be struck between basic skills, traditional academic subjects, vocational learning and wider life skills. On the whole, the service users engaged in this consultation felt that aspects of all these educational spheres need to be included. In order to strike a suitable educational balance, it was suggested that each service user be assessed individually to ascertain the exact level of their abilities and knowledge. Although this procedure is supposedly already in place,

some of the service users had not been evaluated until sometime into their sentence, if at all. There was also little attempt to tie custodial education into any that had been gained before incarceration.

*"They should assess us first. If you are going for a college you would need to do an initial assessment. You go there and do your maths and English and then they see what level you are at."*

The necessity to supply tutoring in life-skills such as effective communication, anger management, and domestic management was highlighted as fundamentally important by everyone. This is crucial as many service users lack familiarity with even the most basic day-to-day tasks. Particularly in the male population of the youth estate there are an increasing number of current or soon to be parents. As such, provision must be made to help these service users learn the skills of a responsible parent whilst not involved in their offspring's upbringing.

*"Daily stuff. I don't know how to cook or clean."*

*"Learn how to talk to people. Communication skills. Once someone has been in jail so long they lack general communication skills."*

*"They need life skills. They need to know how to clean and cook and how to take care of themselves. Budgeting is a major thing. If you have got money coming in and you are spending most of it on takeaways and you don't have enough to pay your rent and your gas and electricity, your life is going to be hard. That is going to make you want to do crime to support your lifestyle. A lot of people are doing crime to support their lifestyles. A lot of drug users are doing that. If they've got the right life skills to budget and plan, then they might not need to commit crime."*

The participants recognised the importance of traditional academic subjects such as mathematics and English. These disciplines were considered critical not only for improving literacy and numeracy but also for helping service users secure employment. The desire to be more employable was reflected in the other subjects the service users thought would be beneficial. These included business studies and IT.

*"Business, maths, English. I'm not sure about science, because some people might find science too tough. Mainly maths, English, business and media."*

*"Maths, English, IT."*

Training in practical skills such as plumbing, bricklaying, mechanics, and catering were also desirable.

*"Something that could benefit me when I came out, like plumbing."*

*"Construction."*

*"Motor mechanics, electrics, plumbing."*

*"Motor mechanics, cooking. Why not? When I went in to jail I didn't know how to cook. I learnt how to cook in jail. I can cook anything now."*

*"Health and safety stuff. First aid. Stuff like that is basic stuff. They don't do that in prison."*

Not only does this feedback highlights the importance of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning but it also demonstrates that service users are enthusiastic to learn about the specific subjects and specialisms that will help them gain employment on the outside.

*"With most of the things I chose in there, it is something related to what we did already or what we want to do when we get out. It is never something totally new. They maybe just have to find better teachers that specialise in the areas that the people want."*

## Teachers

---

In **Questions A and I** the consultation seeks to identify the best way to engage people in custody and the skills, competencies and experience staff would need to achieve this. The service users felt that these two questions were related. In response, there was a strong feeling amongst the focus groups participants that the relationship service users had with educational staff was pivotally important for sustained and successful engagement. For some, a failure to effectively understand, empathise and communicate was not only an issue in custody but was contributory to educational issues prior to custodial terms. Some service users also suggested that 'damaged' people have difficulty learning and that if educational programs during custody are to be effective they must address any issues with sensitivity.

*"We had one teacher. She didn't know what she was doing. Everyone was talking and no one did nothing. She just felt lost. She ended up sitting down the whole lesson and no one learned nothing. Our normal teacher would come in, she would let everyone talk for a bit, let them chill for a while, then she would bring in the work, help the people who want the help and stuff like that. Then everything flows."*

*"I think the teachers should be able to communicate with the students. Certain teachers are judgemental; 'You are in jail, what are you in for?' kind of thing. I think they should be calm and not be prejudiced with the people. So that the people can feel comfortable."*

In order to improve this situation, it was suggested that some of the Secure College staff, particularly those undertaking teaching, could be ex-service users. The participants believed that the inclusion of those better equipped to build stable 'partnerships' with individuals during their educational journey in custody would make a significant contribution to their success. It was felt that people who understand the backgrounds of service users would be better able to sympathise and appreciate their motivations and problems. For most, the implementation of

ex-service users in some capacity, or at least better training for current staff, would add authenticity, trust and reliability to teacher/pupil relations. This would also help counter the impression that all staff intrinsically hold unsympathetic and judgemental attitudes towards service users. Ultimately, the innate ability of ex-service users to motivate and inspire through affinity and respect should not be underestimated. Indeed, for the participants in this study, an individual who had 'walked in their shoes' and had subsequently changed their behaviour in a positive manner would have a profoundly beneficial, valuable and constructive effect on those in custody.

*"You need to have an understanding. It would work better with somebody who comes from a similar background, who has maybe been to prison or has some experience of prison. It would work better than with somebody who has just come from university."*

*"Do you know what would make me learn if I was in there? If someone had gone through what I did and went into prison for what I did, and then came out and got himself a decent job, if he could come and talk to me about his experience I would learn from that. I would want to get out of the place as soon as possible, so I would start getting an education and learning so I could get myself a job."*

*"I think there should also be some sort of mentor who is from their background and has experience in those things."*

Another method of incentivising education and/or training whilst in custody was the continuation of financial benefits offered to service users in order to encourage them to fully engage.

*"I think the best way to motivate people who are in prison into education is to give them something. The reason I went into education was because they gave me £1.70 and they gave me a good comment. That is why I went into education."*

## Careers advice

---

The consultation asks what other key services would be delivered to prevent those in custody from reoffending on release and to support them to get placements in education, training or employment in **Questions G and J**. For the service user participants, the incorporation of a careers advice service within the Secure College was considered an effective means of achieving this. It was thought that, ultimately, this would be an essential addition to the scheme. Indeed, the inclusion of something akin to a 'Careers Officer' would be integral to addressing the deficiency of employment/education information. It could also facilitate improved links between Secure Colleges and outside agencies.

*"If you want to do business, the careers officer could guide you through the different steps. When you get out you won't know what you want to do, because your whole life has been messed around, so a careers worker could advise you how to do things and when to do them."*

*"I think there should be a group of [Careers Advisors]. Not everyone wants to come back and do crime. Sometimes they want to move on but they don't know how to, because they don't have the skills. If there is someone to build up that plan, like they build up your sentence plan in jail, someone should do your life plan."*

*"There was this thing we used to do in college called Career Plan. Basically you look at your two year, five year and eight year goals. If you give a person the time to do that, you relate it back to the skills that they have. It should be a group of people who do that. Everyone has to have their own individual person. Because when you've got one person doing ten people, they lose focus of what to do with them."*

*"They should make you realise you are still young and you should take the chances you have now before it is too late."*

## **Beyond the Secure College gate**

---

Participants felt that some form of career/education advisory service could also help people to prepare for release by helping them arrange to continue their learning and/or training on the outside. The service users interviewed understood that any progress achieved in custody must be sustained and built upon after release. It was recommended that links be forged between the Secure College 'career service' and outside academic, training and employment agencies. It was suggested that the absence of an adequately robust educational/training network outside of the prison gate was a direct contributor towards recidivism. As such, any attempt to improve this situation was promoted.

*"There needs to be stuff in place for people before they leave, like college and stuff to do in the evening, like playing football, or youth clubs, stuff like that. "*

*"I want a [bricklaying] apprenticeship out of it when I come out." (Male)*

*"Apprenticeships and that sort of thing. When you come out you should be offered them straight away. Something specific for them."*

*"If someone is doing good education-wise in there, when they come out the college could refer them to a different college outside, or refer them to an apprenticeship."*

*"Yeah, and they could provide them with an apprenticeship or a job when they leave. That would be good for them, they would have that support. They would have a goal and think, when I go out I can have a job and I can survive. Rather than when they get out they have no job, no nothing. If that happens you are going back to jail."*

Some of the service users mentioned how they had to contact outside agencies themselves due to a lack of information available whilst in custody. This was seen

as a decisive impediment to the continuation of educational activities and an issue that needed to be addressed.

*"If you are doing your business level one, for instance, when you come out, they should refer you so you can do business level two. Put them through the stages."*

*"I wanted a college in place, a place to go, maybe an apprenticeship."*

*"During my time in jail I got in touch with my college and the principal came in to see me. We build up a relationship. You need to know about colleges that will accept you even with a criminal record, youth centres that you can go to, gym membership if you want it, just stuff to keep you busy."*

The idea of a mentor who would form a long-term 'partnership' with service users and help them maintain their academic study/training commitments outside was proposed by the service users.

*"Someone to talk to. When you come out the first day you think 'I am actually here now'. You have been thinking about it and now you are actually here. What are you going to do? You need support from someone to bring you back to reality. As we said, the mentor thing, is a good idea."*

*"I think there should be a mentor place in the borough, somebody from our background who has experience and knows what is going on. They should do home visits or you could meet them somewhere to talk about how your life is going. They could then help you or call the people who can. Like a key worker. That should all be in place when you come out."*

*"I think somebody should come and meet you from prison. The YOT worker or a mentor or something."*

*"You definitely need a mentor because some people might not be bothered to wake up in the morning for their classes. Somebody could go to them and wake them up."*

In order for this partnership to be as effective as possible, it was suggested that the initial engagement should take place between the service user and their mentor well before release.

*"While you are in jail, she should come and visit you and talk and get to know you before you are released."*

*"I think that relationship should be build up while the person is in prison. The mentor can then contact the parents."*

*"People aren't ready at the beginning. It is a mindset. If you don't want to change, then it is never going to work for you. But as time goes on you have a lot of time to think and your mind progresses."*

*"When the person reaches half way, that is when the mentor gets in place."*

## **Secure Colleges: many small or fewer large?**

---

**Questions P, Q and R** focus on how many people should be in each facility, where they should be located and how they could be incorporated in to the existing secure estate. The service users involved in this response answered these three questions by considering if there should be many small Secure Colleges or fewer, large ones. Although some held that Secure Colleges should be phased in slowly, most realised that it there would be an unfair impact on those that did not have access to the proposed education reforms. Some had experience of this situation already and, on the whole, it was felt that this situation should be avoided.

*"There is a course called Resettlement, but not everyone gets to do it. I think it is stupid that they've got the course, but not everyone gets to do it."*

*"I think they should start small by having one or two, before they decide to make it national. They should try it small first."*

*"No, all of them should have it. If they've gone away for a time and five of the ten can go into the school and six of them want to do something with their life, one of them is not going to have that chance."*

*"It is better if they are everywhere. Imagine if a prison is full, you won't have the opportunity to be allocated to that prison and to go to the college and try to make something out of it. It is better if they have them with every prison rather than having a few."*

*"They should have little colleges in each prison."*

Importantly, some of the service users recognised that consideration must be given to gangs, their associations and how this might affect learning and interaction in the class room.

*"The problem with that is you need to remember the gangs thing as well. If you've got people from Rochester and different jails all coming into one place there are going to be a lot of people that don't get along. They need to look at the demand. If there is a demand for the thing, then they match the supply."*

*"If they are comfortable with the company they are in the same class with, the people they are studying with on the course. If they are not comfortable then there is tension and shit is going to happen."*

## KEY MESSAGES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

The feedback collected has highlighted several key themes. User Voice strongly advocates the benefits of utilising service user engagement in the planning, delivery and monitoring of successful service provision. As such, User Voice recommends the Government considers the following factors when finalising the reforms to youth custody.

1. The proposed reforms should be more widely publicised, particularly via routes accessible to current service users. This will promote increased debate and thus improve the effectiveness of the reforms.
2. Each service user should be given a personalised assessment. This should take into account specific individual needs in order that educational progress can be made. This should be reviewed regularly.
3. Individual assessments need to ascertain a service user's previous educational background and level and prepare a suitable timetable of academic, vocational and life-skill training for each individual. Particular attention should be given to BME groups, female offenders, those who are parents and those with special or mental health needs.
4. Higher financial incentives to work in low skilled prison industries than for education should be stopped. Not helping service users to better themselves whilst in custody is counter-productive to reduce reoffending.
5. There is a need for future Secure College staff to pro-actively build stable relationships with individual service users so that long-term change can be achieved together. Ideally, this should include a one-to-one level preferably involving peer mentoring.
6. Secure College staff training should focus on a better understanding of the backgrounds, issues, and problems faced by service users. This training could come from ex-service users.
7. Qualifications need to have real world value and vocational courses should be to professional standards in order to provide young people better opportunities post release.
8. The lack of support after release for short-term prisoners is a major cause of re-offending. Holding down a job and living independently is integral to sustained success. Secure Colleges must forge links with outside agencies, colleges and training facilities to combat this.
9. Any transfer of a service user that results in disruption or impediment to their educational program should be discouraged.
10. The inclusion of service user input during all stages of the process of reforming youth education in custody services should be promoted. These

consultations should be built into the assessment of educational providers contracts.

11. Viewing former service users as a source of potential future recruitment to the youth estate and developing proactive and systematic strategies to promote this should be encouraged.

Since its inception, User Voice has recognised the importance of service user input for the development of policy and procedure. This ethos is part of its core philosophy. User Voice knows that to disregard the actual people who use a service, whether it be a shopping centre, a hospital or even a prison is illogical and ultimately destined to fall short. The Government now acknowledges that the current youth estate's educational facilities are inadequate and ineffectual. The statistics speak for themselves. Not only is this reflected in the unsustainable youth reoffending rates, but more importantly, it has an unacceptably negative impact on the lives of hundreds of our vulnerable young people. As part of its re-evaluation the Government has the opportunity to make a lasting and positive improvement to the system and remove the barriers to successful resettlement. This response demonstrates the high value in engaging those who have been at the sharp end of a service. The voices presented here are the tip of the iceberg. If the Government are to make the greatest and most wide reaching reforms it needs to ensure that more of these individuals are heard and the insight that they can provide is fully explored.

**For more information please contact:**

User Voice  
20 Newburn Street  
London SE11 5PJ

Tel: 020 3137 7471

Email: [info@uservoice.org](mailto:info@uservoice.org)

Website: [www.uservoice.org](http://www.uservoice.org)

© User Voice 2013