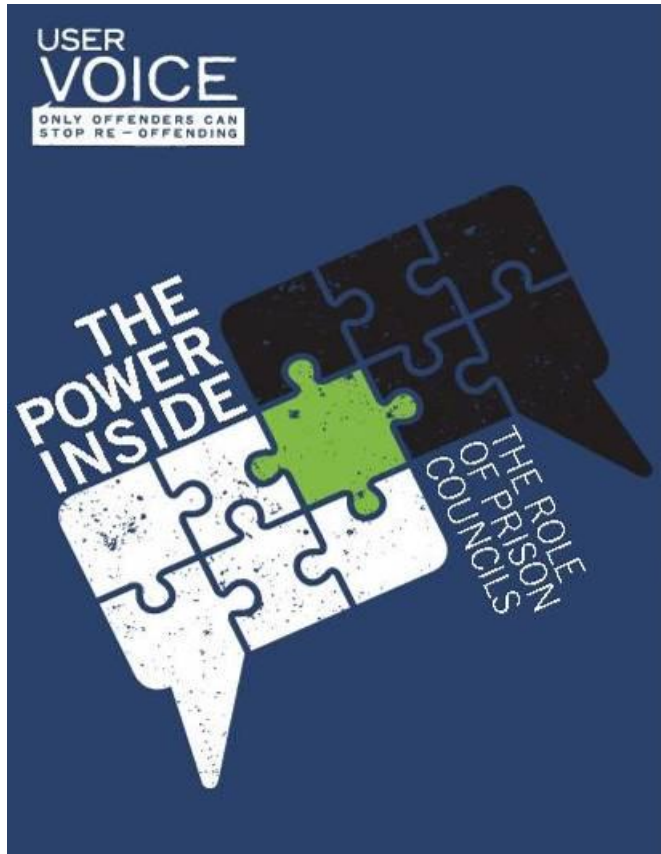


# **The Power Inside:** *The Role of Prison Councils*

## **Summary of Report**



**User Voice** exists to reduce offending.

**Our Prison Council** is a model of democratic engagement.

**Its impact** benefits individual offenders, the prison community and society as a whole.

## FEEDBACK

*"Don't start thinking the council is about introducing free democracy. It isn't. It's about this community taking some responsibility for itself."*

Barry Greenberry, former Governor HMP Isle of Wight

*"Of course, offenders need to take responsibility for their actions, especially so when they have resulted in direct harm to others. This is important because although there are structural inequalities that may restrict or diminish personal choices, choices can be made at particular points in time and acted on and behaviour can be changed. This is where User Voice is particularly well placed, in enabling prisoners to find a way through some of these structural and personal challenges."*

Professor Graham Towl, Durham University, UK

*"You have to get out there and convince people of what you're fighting for. Inside the council, we're all out for one thing: to better our lives and the lives of the [people] who come after us."*

Prison council participant

*"I searched for 'offender engagement' on the internet and all it came back with was 'offender management'. How people are treated has a direct impact on how they behave, and we're here to produce good citizens, not good prisoners."*

Andy Hudson, Governor HMP Maidstone

## USER VOICE

User Voice exists to reduce offending.

Our work is led and delivered by ex-offenders who promote dialogue between users and providers of services within the criminal justice system. We help unheard voices to make a difference and enable policy makers and practitioners to listen directly to service users.

A reduction in offending can be achieved through our objectives:

- 1) Improving services and institutions within the criminal justice system;
- 2) Providing a rehabilitation experience for individual offenders; and
- 3) Mainstreaming the inclusion of the user voice within policy.

Whilst we are a powerful advocate on behalf of offenders, we also aim to provide people with training and skills, which enable them to speak for themselves.

We are well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in the criminal justice system because User Voice is led and run by people who have experience of the problems we are seeking to solve.

The aim is to create a system where offenders are more empowered and deeply engaged in the services they rely on and where they are able to take greater responsibility in developing services that reduce offending.

Our work covers three core strands:

- The *User Voice Council Model*, which can be developed for use within prisons or in the community;
- *Bespoke Consultations*, which involve working with clients to design projects aimed at accessing, hearing and acting upon the insights of those who are hardest to reach; and
- *Advocacy* work aimed at engaging the media, the public, practitioners and policy-makers.

## THE PROJECT

In late 2009, User Voice implemented its council model in the three prison sites that make up HMP Isle of Wight (Albany, Camp Hill & Parkhurst). The aim was to test the model with different groups (including long-term, short-term and vulnerable prisoners).

The approach is based on models of democratic engagement with the council itself made up of elected prisoners. It is designed to enable elected members to voice the views of their fellow prisoners to management, strengthening relations and improving services.

Prisoners are asked to form and run 'parties', each representing common challenges faced by prisoners and the prison system. We work closely with prisoners and staff exploring what each party may concern itself with; for example, Housing & Employment, Training & Education, Community & Environment or Resettlement.

Ex-offenders deliver training workshops to candidates and supporters, equipping them with the skills needed to campaign and canvass, get staff and prisoners involved, and ensure that they represent the wider views of their community.

On Election Day, votes are cast for one of the parties, not for individual candidates. The number of council seats allocated to each group is proportionate to the number of votes won. Councils meet regularly, attended by those elected, as well as the Governor and members of staff representing the senior management team.

The emphasis is not simply on raising problems but on developing ideas that can overcome these. Our model has been developed as a mechanism to bring some representative democracy inside institutions.

As well as helping to develop skills amongst prisoners and improving relationships, the model aims to be enjoyable and inspiring. This is critical to maintaining momentum and engagement, but can also have a powerful impact on offenders' aspirations.

## IMPACT

*“Prisons are full of individuals who want to change but think they can’t, or lack the courage or skills to try. Enabling those individuals, who are lost in the system, to meet past offenders who have changed successfully is one of the most effective and inspiring things I have ever seen in prison. User Voice has provided a unique model of inclusion which has had a profound impact on a wide number of offenders looking for a way out.”*

Barry Greenberry, former Governor HMP Isle of Wight

Participation rates in the council elections averaged 54% over the three sites.

At the Albany site, there was a 37% reduction in complaints from prisoners over the period that the council functioned. At Parkhurst, the number of segregation days - a good indicator of prisoner dissatisfaction and tensions - was reduced from 160 to 47 days over the same period.

Parkhurst also decided to bring its two regimes - vulnerable prisoners and Category B (non-violent) prisoners - together for the User Voice pilot. The result was joint working on issues as well as more shared activities, representing a huge cultural shift, involving two sets of prisoners that were otherwise separated at all times.

Other aspects of prison life that were improved included:

- Family visiting arrangements;
- The Incentives, Earnings and Privileges Scheme; and
- Canteen supplier.

*“Elections are good. We go around with our flyers, talking to people about our parties and what we believe in. There’s so many good ideas out there, we want to air them.”*

Prison council participant

The success of the pilots led to User Voice implementing the council model at HMP Maidstone, where elections took place in February 2011.

## WIDER IMPACT

For some time there has been a discussion of the merits or otherwise of enfranchising prisoners. As far as we can establish, no one has actually asked prisoners if they want or would vote, something that we feel is crucially missing from the debate.

Council members at HMP Isle of Wight were given training by market research company *So What?*, enabling them to undertake a survey of prisoners on attitudes to voting. Around 560 prisoners completed the survey, which revealed that just 35% of those eligible voted in the 2005 general election.

However, 66% of respondents said that they intended to vote in the next national elections (if able to do so). Significantly, when split into those that engaged in the Prison Council process and those that didn't, the former group was about 50% more likely to want to vote in national elections (79% versus 53%)<sup>1</sup>

This survey was not intended to make the case for voting reform (although User Voice is a supporter). What we are most interested in is the impact that being involved in a council has on prisoners' level of enthusiasm for voting: being involved in internal democratic structures seemed to see a 'democratic habit' emerging.

This shift in attitude is a powerful indicator of a potential change in behaviour. An increased likelihood of voting could indicate an increased likelihood of engaging constructively in society.

Most offenders generally live on society's margins and they have rarely been engaged to participate as citizens before. Our Prison Council model hands them some personal responsibility - an important new experience for those trapped inside a system that perpetuates their powerlessness - and offers them a channel to articulate how they can help, and be helped, to change.

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<sup>1</sup> Baz van Cranenburgh, *A Market Research Summary*, So What? Research Ltd, April 2010.

## CONCLUSION

*“These striking findings show that Prison Council elections awaken prisoners’ interest in the national democratic process. These results are particularly encouraging because ex-prisoners who fulfil their civic responsibilities by voting are more likely to show responsibility in other areas of their lives. In addition, Prison Councils can use prisoners’ insights to improve the rehabilitation process which is the best way of protecting the public from future offending.”*

Mark Johnson, Founder of User Voice

This report is not meant as an argument for giving prisoners the vote. Although we do favour change in this respect, voting reform is in our view the second stage of the process. Enfranchising prisoners must begin with the engagement that comes with Prison Councils.

They are a potentially powerful tool for helping to inform and improve the quality of prison management while underpinning the rehabilitation process because they are based on moral notions of both prisoner rights and responsibilities.

It is not always easy empowering some of the most chaotic and marginalised groups in society, but the benefits are invaluable. To reduce offending, people at the sharp end of the system need to be equipped to lead successful lives.

It’s not hard to find out what’s needed – you just have to ask them.



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