



INSIDE KNOWLEDGE: What service users think about prison

**A service user response to The Justice Committee's inquiry
Prisons: Planning and Policy**

May 2014

1. ABOUT USER VOICE

1.1 User Voice is unique 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. The aim is to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience for offenders, better criminal justice services and institutions, and more effective policy.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 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 service users and record their reactions to the Government's programme of reforms and efficiency savings within prison. As a result of these consultations several themes were identified which are presented here.

2.2 User Voice believes that no one can provide better insight in to these issues than the service users themselves.

2.3 User Voice undertook nine focus groups across England with service users from two prisons and five probation trusts. These focus groups included a total of **54 participants**, 21 currently in prison and 33 having been released from prison within the last 12 months.

2.4 The probation trusts and prisons include: Gloucestershire Probation Trust, London Probation Trust, Merseyside Probation Trust, Northumbria Probation Trust and Wiltshire Probation Trust, HMP Birmingham and HMP Maidstone.

2.5 Of these participants, 85.9% were male and 14.1% female. 75% came from a white ethnic background whilst 25% came from a black or minority ethnic background.

2.6 User Voice used its ability to access the voice of service users to look at those issues of the Justice Committee's inquiry that most explicitly have an effect on the day to day life of prisoners, although other areas were also discussed:

"The extent to which the Government's aspiration for "working prisons" has been achieved."

"The impact of lower operational costs on prison regimes, access to education, training and other purposeful activity, the physical environment, safety and security."

2.7 In relation to the extent to which the aspiration for “working prisons” has been achieved, a minority of service users believed it had been achieved to a large extent with positive consequences. A further group felt prisons were moving away from work and experienced more idle time. However **the majority felt that working prisons had been achieved to an extent, but with serious flaws and reservations.**

2.8 In relation to the impact of lower operational costs, User Voice found that service users **believe that lower operational costs are having a serious negative impact** on their security, safety, environment, food, and access to education, books and courses.

2.9 In relation to the suitability of prison locations and visitor accessibility, many service users reported that the **location of their prison had or has a negative impact** on mental health, safety and desistance.

3. WORKING PRISONS

“It is not worthwhile. It often does not teach you anything nor does it give you transferable skills. This is not nourishing work.” (Male).

3.1 Service users were all very aware that there have been efforts to move towards a “working prison” model for prisons. Many service users agreed that, in their experience, **prisons had become more focused towards work, with a decrease in idle time.** However, these service users were divided over both the effectiveness and extent to which the Government’s aspiration for working prisons has been achieved. Additionally, some focus group participants felt that the idea of having workings had failed entirely, with prisons currently moving in the opposite direction towards more idle time.

3.2 A number of service users were adamant that the prisons they had experienced had become working prisons, with a definite emphasis on reducing prisoners’ idle time.

“You can’t just sit there and say you are doing courses, you have to do a productive job, get paid, show up for work on time.” (Female).

“You would have no time basically...everyone had to work it was a proper working prison.” (Male).

“There were loads of jobs, they created jobs. From cleaner to gym attendant to clean the gym and keep it tidy, not just working in the servery or as a cleaner. You can go into the kitchen to cook, there were people working at the radio, doing computer courses there was a whole list” (Male).

"When you are on remand there is a lot of idle time but once you are convicted that disappears. They make sure that you are doing something." (Male).

"I never worked a day in my life until I went to prison. I work now full time. I worked in both prisons I was in." (Female).

"(In prison they had plenty of education and plenty of work, I never heard of problems with people not able to get into work or education - so I had no problems." (Male).

3.3 One service user stated that the idea of working prisons had been implemented to such an extent that this priority can even be put before prisoner health.

"All efforts and ideas are focused on someone having a longer working day without consideration for other issues...even being forced to attend when they are physically ill." (Male).

3.4 Moreover, a number of service users stated that not only has the idea of working prisons been implemented, but that it has also been **effective and worthwhile** for service users and should be continued. Common explanations for this were that prison work gave service users useful qualifications and work experience which could be used upon release.

"Contract work where prison labour is used to supply private sector functions is more rewarding and more help when released [than traditional prison work]." (Male).

"Prison work is important and does give a sense of purpose to our time in custody." (Male).

"Those jobs [that give you specific skills] when you get released you can go into one of those recycling places and get a job." (Male).

"It is definitely worth it because in some you can get qualifications like in double glazing, some offer qualifications for working on the railways... [you get] experience in a bit of life that you never had before." (Male).

"It will have a direct impact on re-offending because the more people that come out and can get a job they will not be more likely to re-offend it makes sense all round that prisoners should work while in prison." (Male).

"I got qualifications and it put me into a routine of going to work as well. I have never known that routine." (Female).

3.5 However, whilst we found service users who believed the Government's aspiration for working prisons had been implemented to a large extent, and moreover had positive experiences from this, it should be strongly noted that the **majority of service users believed that either prisons were regressing away from working prisons, or that the implementation of working prisons has been far from successful.**

"My experience in [prison name removed], you were getting less and less work. They were trying to fob it off. Making it too difficult as though they didn't want it to be there." (Male).

"The normal story is there isn't enough work, and there are not enough spaces in the education." (Female).

"Prison is becoming all about idle time behind bars." (Male).

"There has been a raise on unemployment since last year, there are less courses and workshop provided, there have been implemented barriers to distance learning for foreign nationals." (Male).

"The prison does not seem focused on work as there are not enough employment opportunities and it takes far too long after arriving in the prison to get work." (Male).

"You are stuck behind your door more. [Sometimes for] 23 hours. It's mad – a lot of the time you could be put to good use." (Male).

3.6 For those service users who acknowledged that prison work had become more prominent, the most frequently raised issue with it for service users is that the **work provided was not meaningful, inadequate or useless** upon release from prison.

"It is not worthwhile. It often does not teach anything nor does it give transferable skills. This is not nourishing work." (Male).

"Workshops don't teach anything but useless basic skills and the variety of workshops is being reduced rather than increased." (Male).

"There should be more focus on skills you can actually use." (Male).

"I think that to do work inside prison just for the sake of doing work isn't beneficial. I have done this but what have I got to show for it." (Male).

"You are earning them money but when you leave you're like ok I am going to work in contract services but can't [get a job]. What skills do you learn?" (Male).

"The work isn't worthwhile; it doesn't help you get a job on release." (Male).

"There are very few jails that offer jobs that you can use to get jobs outside." Male).

"There are things out there for a trade that you could be doing jail before you come out and they don't do it they do silly courses that don't matter and you're not going to need them." (Male).

"Make it something worthwhile so that you are rather learning a skill than just killing time. A lot of it is just killing time." (Male).

3.7 Service users both currently in prison and on probation were also highly concerned about working prisons being used as an **excuse to exploit prisoners**. Participants of the focus groups were very vocal in their resentment of this aspect of prison work. The feeling that prison work is exploitative is clearly linked to the above concerns that prisoners gain nothing from being forced to work within prison. However, these comments went beyond a suggestion that working prisons had been badly implemented, implying that the goal of policy makers is to use service users for economic benefit, with little consideration given to the service users themselves. It is clear from responses that if this view is held, regardless of its validity, the initiative of working prisons will struggle to help service users in the face of such hostility.

"The company gets the money and you are just an assistant." (Male).

"All you are doing realistically – and this is the view of most people in jail – is just making the prison money. Whether you are packing parts for Argos or B&Q or any of the other major retailers in this country you are effectively working for about 12 quid a week doing 6-7 hours a day." (Male).

"They need to make a decision if they want to make a profit or if they want to reduce crime. If you want to reduce crime and reduce reoffending they need to do what probation are doing and start from the ground up. Start by talking to people who have been inside." (Male).

"Some of it is like slave labour – you are working for 15 quid and you have a job that you wouldn't have out here and then you get the prices of their stuff as well which is double the price of stuff out here." (Male).

"We only work for prison profitability and not employability and resettlement." (Male).

"It's more like a slave trade." (Male).

"The feeling of many is that we are being exploited." (Male).

3.8 Another concern that was apparent from the focus groups is the view that the idea of working prisons has been achieved to too great an extent, to the point that it is being **prescribed for all service users despite suitability**.

"I think that something that could be made better is people with disabilities and addictions to not assume that everyone can just handle it - to put in some provisions so that we have better support at times." (Female).

"When I came out of prison I ended up in hospital because even though I could get a job coming out of prison, the pressure, you can't get prepared for the stress the workload brings and the budgeting of money...so as much as it is a good thing for those who have never had a job - if you suffer from mental health it was just too much for me." (Female).

3.9 Similarly, some service users were **concerned about the appropriateness of the work**.

"Working in the prison is a good thing. But I feel some of the courses are more geared towards reoffenders and young offenders there are not programmes for older people." (Male).

4. EDUCATION

4.1 It should be noted that for many service users, education is a fundamental part of the idea of a "working prison". This is due to its proactive nature, contrasted to idle time in cells. Similar to prison work, service users reported the same problems of a **lack of availability**, inappropriateness and of not being provided to a level that will help individuals upon release.

"When I was in Holloway I put my name down for so many courses but they took so long to get back to me that I had already left before I had the opportunity to start anything." (Male).

"The whole focus on prison education is...we will teach you to read and write and that is it." (Male).

"IT level 2 or brick laying level 1 are qualifications which are worth nothing outside...only serious qualifications lead to careers away from crime" (Male).

"Give you qualifications that you can use, not stuff that you're getting and putting in the cupboard and not using. They do silly courses that don't matter and you're not going to need them." (Male).

5. IMPACT OF LOWER OPERATIONAL COSTS

"If they are going to be focused on profit and loss then the riots are going to come back because they won't be investing in infrastructure, health provision etc." (Male).

5.1 Again, service users were very aware of an attempt for prisons to achieve lower operation costs. There are a wide range of areas that service users feel have been impacted on by such cost saving measures, including: safety and security, the quality of food, access to books and other activities, access to education or training, access to courses and the general prison environment.

5.2 The most worrying impact that lower operational costs has had in prisons, from the point of view of service users, is its **negative impact on safety and security**. Service users consulted in our focus groups frequently mentioned concerns related to a lack of staff.

"About 160 in the yard and 2 screws on the door...one guy got punched, hit his head on the floor, he was critical for about 6 months and that was because there was no staff. They saw it happen but there was nothing they could do." (Male).

"They want to let you out but they can't because there just isn't enough staff. They feel the tension as well and when you get pissed off they are the ones getting it – in verbal in attacks." (Male).

"If less staff are visible and you have guys who are bored guys are going to play up." (Male).

"Try find a member of staff and there isn't one on the wing and someone will try and make a scene on the wing so that staff will come out and have a look what's going on. If that's the way you have to get attention obviously it's [lower operational costs] affecting things." (Male).

"We have had 48 hour lockdowns for lack of staff and it doesn't only affect the prisoners but it also affects staff." (Male).

"When there is less staff there are more people getting injured when there is fighting going on. If someone has committed suicide it is taking longer to get to them cause of the less staff and the cutbacks." (Male).

5.3 Service users also stated that lower operational costs have affected the **security and safety** of service users through other means other than reducing staff, including increasing an environment of hostility, exploitation and depression.

"The environment is less stable and safety and security has gone out of the window. Persons are not able to access basic toiletries because there is no money available to purchase the items." (Male).

"[Cuts] destroyed the environment. Led to increased self-harm, led to increased suicide." (Male).

"[More time in cell is] going to escalate to riots or violence towards prison officers because all you will be thinking is what I can do to get out of this cell." (Male).

"There is more hostility. There were girls giving sexual favours to get their tobacco and things. And then when things happen you can't talk to the staff because they are sleeping with those girls...the bullying doesn't just come from other inmates it comes from staff. They will come in and talk about what they had for dinner last night." (Female).

"I think if they cut back too much and people are banged up in their cells all day that is going to breed a lot of discontent." (Male).

"Every aspect of prison life has been impacted by budget cuts. The overall quality of life for prisoners has been reduced as well as officers! I don't know where to start. Stop talking about running prisons 'like a business' when both the 'product' (prisoners) and the 'product capability' (officers) are human elements. We are not machines." (Male).

"The general mood in prison has declined as staff are more stressed and uncertainty increased. The drop in resources has impacted focus on rehabilitation and made prison much more punitive and punishing on prisoners and their families and friends." (Male).

"The idea of cost cutting has had a severe impact on most of the areas [of life in prison]. The regime instituted is causing major disgruntlement and frustrations for inmates as well as staff". (Male).

5.4 Another area of the prison service users state has been effected by reduced operational costs is that of the **physical environment**.

"Simple basic hygiene stuff that actually has an effect on your mental state while you are serving your time you can't get access to like a mop bucket and a mop and a brush." (Male).

"Even toilet rolls and shower gel and toothpaste and toothbrush, you should have personal hygiene stuff provided by the prison and you don't get that." (Male).

"You are now coming back to the state where you have cockroaches in the cells and we are going back to Victorian times." (Male).

"In Bristol the cleanliness is abysmal. You have to be painted head to toe with white stuff. You get scabies, because they don't wash the sheets properly." (Male).

"It also affects hygiene levels as people are not getting out often enough to shower as there aren't enough staff. Some days it can go on for 3-4 days and the only way you can get a shower is if you go to the gym." (Male).

5.5 Service users across the country raised concerns within the focus groups that lower operational costs were having a great impact on the quality, quantity and variety of **food within prison**. Again service users were quick to state that this has the impact of creating a negative atmosphere within a prison.

"It fosters a certain kind of atmosphere. You are hungry and there is no food at the servery and no food in your cell." (Male).

"It's just getting worse the more they cut back its just getting worse. I used to go into the kitchen at Dartmoor and it used to stink, it was horrible." (Male).

"You feel as though you are not getting enough nourishment. You lose weight. You feel starving." (Male).

"The diet in prison has been downgraded and many dishes present are highly unhealthy. Portions size has shrank and many dishes were removed from menu because, again, of budget cuts." (Male).

5.6 Another key area of concern for service users is the decreasing access to **books, libraries, education and courses** throughout prisons due to lower operational costs. Often this can be another side effect of reduced staffing, for example, reducing the ability of prisons to take prisoners to the library or run courses, or the causes may be more direct, such as simply not being able to afford new books.

"The library is there you can see it from your window but it's got no staff." (Male).

"There is a critically low reading age for the prison population and that is only going to get lower not higher without books." (Male).

"There are less [educational] courses and the achievable qualifications are lower." (Male).

"We used to have someone come in to do NA meetings, they used to drive from outside Bristol to come in and they don't anymore." (Male).

6. PRISON LOCATION AND VISITOR ACCESS

6.1 Service users stated within the focus groups that **prison locations and visitor accessibility** are another serious concern. This is further compounding the issues stated above – such as hindered resettlement, security and depression – brought on by efficiency savings and the perception of forced arbitrary work.

"All the way through my sentence I was always a minimum of 150-200 miles away. They need to understand that a big part of desisting is linked with family – if you want to keep the link with family going they need to do something to provide for that." (Male).

"You are going to impact on the security in the jail because if someone is very far away and they are not seeing their kids, families, missus whatever you are more likely to be a security risk than if you are happy and seeing your family." (Male).

"Sometimes you land in a remand prison and you are not even in your own city. That has a big impact on a lot of people – you have families. Makes visiting very difficult." (Male).

"If your family can't see you – you start blaming the system, you start breaking down. Family are the people who give you hope." (Male).

6.2 Location was of most significance for **foreign national** service users. These service users experienced particularly pronounced problems related to prison location as, they felt, it is often more difficult for them to transfer to a prison located closer to their family. They believed that this perception is the result of those fighting deportation having a higher degree of difficulty in being re-categorised or receiving ROTL (release on temporary licence) due to a fear of absconding.

"As foreign national, we have little options as to where we can transfer to. Location of the prison causes serious challenges to many under-resourced families. Since we cannot generally choose to move to a prison closer to home and our family ties suffer." (Male).

"At a foreign national prison...we can't transfer closer to home. Therefore there is added pressure on family, resources and prisoner morale." (Male).

“There are lots of issues that arise from the location, because prisoners are not located where their families live, thereby destroying family ties.” (Male).

“More offenders in this prison are affected by [prison location] and more have families that cannot visit them as they live North London.” (Male).

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Service user engagement is currently being promoted across criminal justice services. 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 direct experience of prison to voice their opinions and perspectives, we are ultimately facilitating the shaping and development of improved services for all.

7.2 This principle was evidence throughout all of our focus groups, as service users were extremely knowledgeable of the Government’s programme of reforms and efficiency savings, and demonstrated a large and enthusiastic appetite to have their voices heard.

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