

After being convicted of fraud, Janet trained as a peer mentor for other offenders. She explains how the programme, which provides tailored support depending on individual needs, has changed her life.

From prison to peer mentor – Janet’s story

“My name is Janet; I’m an ex-offender who did four-and-a-half months in prison. I’ve realised the mistakes I’ve made, and the impact my criminal behaviour had on other people and myself.

“I could excuse my criminal behaviour on the fact that I was sexually abused for eight years from the age of five by a family member, and that, when it finally finished, I was then repeatedly raped by a male friend. Or I could blame my criminal behaviour on the fact that my daughter’s father used to beat me up for the tiniest of things, even when I was trying to fight a really horrible illness. But, at the end of the day, my behaviour was my decision. I made the choice to commit fraud, not my ex-partner, my family member, or my rapist. Me.

“Being sent to prison was the worst thing, and yet the best thing, that happened to me. I will never forget the journey from the court to the prison: I cried and cried for my then 10-year-old daughter, who had to stay with my parents, and who had never been apart from me; or the feeling when the cell door shut behind me and that my life was over. But, in my case, it wasn’t. It was only just beginning.

“By going to prison, I faced up to my problems and addressed my issues and fears. For the first time in a long time, I was honest and open to people and got the help I needed – and that was when the ‘real me’ came back.

“I started working in the prison as a peer mentor. The feeling I had of being there and helping others was unbelievable, and I knew that this was something that I wanted to do when I got home. Thankfully, my probation officer listened to me when I said what I wanted to do. She saw the passion I had for helping other ex-offenders, and referred me to User Voice, where I did the peer mentor training and am now a peer mentor

“It’s not just about giving something back to society – it’s more than that – it’s about turning people’s lives around, by helping them choose the right path to take, to show them that there is more to life than crime. And when that happens, when that person has achieved their goals, and they have the confidence to do whatever they want to do without turning to crime, that is when I feel job satisfaction.

“When I first went to prison I lost my child, my family, my home and my life. Now, I have my daughter back living with me and the bond between us is stronger than ever. I have a wonderful relationship with my family, and most of all, I can make my own decisions, not having to have them made for me like in prison.

I’m now happy and independent. And, more importantly, I’m a better person. I have more confidence, and I don’t need to hide, lie or re-offend. I know that I can get over the obstacles that are put in front of me; really they are just there to make me stronger.

“So that is my journey. That is how I got to be involved with the User Voice programme. And now I am a Mentor and working with three other ex-offenders, different types of offences and different aims that they want to achieve. Because that is what we do, we ask them what it is that they want to do, what goals they want to achieve that will help stop them re-offending.

“Whether it’s issues with housing, problems with claiming benefits, or getting the confidence to go back into employment and having to disclose that you have a criminal record.

“We, as mentors, will help our mentees as much as we can. We will point them in the right direction – but they have to actually do it, we won’t do it for them. By signposting the way for them and then letting them action it, it gives the mentee confidence, a sense of achievement, to know that actually they can do it, and that there is a better life without the need to look at crime. Our mentees can talk to us in complete confidence, and unless they or anyone else are in danger, or they or others are going to commit an act of crime, it remains confidential.

“We know what it’s like to have just come home from prison and feel that everyone knows where you’ve been; that feeling when you go to the job centre to claim benefits and you explain where you’ve just come from, and the look in the eyes of the job centre advisor; the feeling that you are always going to be judged, no matter what. We can instil the confidence in them to move forward with their lives. That is my goal.”

Janet has since moved on to a part-time job with Essex CRC.

Peer mentoring

The peer mentoring system is one of the ways that the Essex Partnership Board is [transforming rehabilitation in the county](#).

In 2012 a peer mentoring scheme was initiated by Essex Probation in partnership with User Voice, a specialist offender-led company, in order to harness the experience of those who have successfully improved their own outlook and situation.

Peer mentors are ex-offenders who have recently completed their orders and licences or are nearing the end of their supervision. Typically, they will have made significant changes in their life, overcoming obstacles to move away from offending and risky behaviour.

Training is provided to the potential mentors by User Voice, resulting in a recognised qualification in mentoring. This means mentors are able to add to their list of achievements, improve their own job prospects, and will go into the job market with qualification, work experience and references.

Additionally, after their mentoring experience, successful candidates have the opportunity to apply for a six-month fixed-term contract as a Case Supporter within Essex Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), what was Essex Probation. Some have moved on to work with Essex CRC in other roles.

Mentors work with offenders to understand their goals and help them overcome issues such as housing, problems with claiming benefits, lacking the confidence to go back into employment and having to disclose a criminal record.