

We can build a system that works for everyone.

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By involving people with lived experience of the criminal justice system, people like me, we can build a system that works for everyone.

Who is me? Well, as well as being a member of the Lived Experience Team (LET) at Revolving Doors, I am also a Peer Mentor there. I'll discuss more about Revolving Doors later, as I'd like to give you a brief summary of my past.

I was first arrested at the age of ten. Permanently excluded from school at 14, and at 15 I experienced my first custodial sentence, and into the school to prison pipeline, I went.

HMDC Blantyre House. Yes sir, no sir. Three bags full sir. Short, sharp, shock. It may have been short, and it may have been sharp, but it didn't shock me. Well, it didn't shock me enough to not end up back in custody several times over the following years, as I found myself trapped in the revolving doors of crisis and crime. I was released from my ninth, and final custodial sentence on the 9th of June 2017.

Since then, rather than break the law I'd like to think, and in my roles at Revolving Doors, I help shape the law, as well as help to shape the practices and policies of the criminal justice system.

Back in 2005, whilst serving in HMP Blundeston, I became a mentor in prison for the first time, for the Shannon Trust. Soon after, I'd also trained to become a Listener. The Listeners were formed in HMP Swansea following the death by suicide of a fifteen-year-old boy who was kept there as a place of safety. Ironic, huh? That was over thirty years ago. The Samaritans knew then the importance of involving people in prison. Lived experience! Since the birth of the Listeners, peer mentoring in prison has become the norm rather than the exception.

It was a shame that the wider society didn't feel the same way about people with lived experience as prisons did and do. However, I'm pleased to say that has now changed. No longer are the voices of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system being ignored, far from it. The voices of people with lived experience are being valued, and not just being

valued they are also being sought; and I remember the days when COMP1s didn't exist.¹

As you know, the criminal justice system is a complex and ever-changing system that has a profound impact on the lives of millions of people. Therefore, it is important to ensure the system is fair, just, and effective, and that it meets the needs of ALL those who come into contact with it. One way to achieve this is to involve people with lived experience in the development and implementation of policies and practices. People with lived experience have a unique perspective on the system, and our insights can be invaluable in making it more fair, just, and effective. For example:

- ❑ We can help to identify areas where the system is failing, and we can offer suggestions for how to improve it.
- ❑ We can also help to develop and implement programmes and services that are tailored to the needs of those who have been involved in the criminal justice system.

There are a few challenges to involving people with lived experience in the criminal justice system. Some of these challenges include:

- ❑ Stigma and discrimination. People with lived experience often face stigma and discrimination, which can make it difficult for them to get involved.
- ❑ Lack of resources. People with lived experience often lack the resources they need to get involved, such as transportation, childcare, and financial assistance.
- ❑ Lack of training. People with lived experience often lack the training they need to be effective in their roles, such as public speaking, conflict resolution, and advocacy.

However, by involving people with lived experience, we can, again, make the system more fair,

1. COMP1 is the name of the form that complaints are submitted on by people in HMPPS prisons.

just, and effective. People with lived experience can also help to identify the challenges that we face, and we can offer suggestions for how to overcome them:

- ❑ It can help to ensure that the system is more responsive to the needs of those who come into contact with it.
- ❑ It can help to build trust and confidence in the system. When people see that our voices are being heard, they are more likely to believe that the system is working for them.
- ❑ It can help to promote innovation and creativity. People with lived experience can bring new ideas and perspectives to the table, which can help to improve the system.

Our insights can be invaluable in identifying areas where the system is failing, and we can offer suggestions for how to improve it. Here are some specific examples of how people with lived experience can be involved in the criminal justice system:

- ❑ We can serve on advisory boards or councils that provide input on policies and practices.
- ❑ We can be employed as staff or volunteers to provide direct services to those who have been involved in the criminal justice system.
- ❑ We can educate the public about the criminal justice system.
- ❑ We can advocate for changes to the system.
- ❑ We can share our stories with policymakers and the media.

When people with lived experience are involved in the criminal justice system, it can lead to a number of positive outcomes, such as:

- ❑ Improved outcomes for people who are caught up in the system.
- ❑ Increased trust between the system and the communities it serves.
- ❑ A more effective and efficient system.

- ❑ A more just and equitable system.

So, who are Revolving Doors and the LET?

Well, Revolving Doors is a national charity working to break the cycle of crisis and crime. We advocate for a system that addresses the drivers of contact with the criminal justice system. In 1993, they were driven by the need to know why one particular group of individuals was trapped in the revolving door of homelessness, crime and mental health problems. Their goal was to transform the lives of people who were being let down by a system that was routinely failing them. By the millennium, they had become acknowledged pioneers in their field. They had a unique reputation for involving people who have suffered the effects of the revolving door in every aspect of their work. Their team had taken ownership of a national problem and was finding answers where nobody had previously thought to look.

In 2008, Revolving Doors launched their first national lived experience forum. From being an 'invisible' group as late as the 1990s, those suffering multiple problems had become the subject of national discussion and debate. Revolving Doors is proud to have led that change for people experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, substance use, domestic violence, repeat victimisation and

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At Revolving Doors:

- ❑ We work in partnership with public sector bodies, voluntary sector organisations and government departments, such as the NHSE Health and Justice teams, the MoJ, and the Probation Service, ensuring the voices of those with lived experience are heard.
- ❑ We partner with academics to research gaps in the evidence base.
- ❑ We work with professional groups to create systems and cultural change.
- ❑ We get to use our lived experience, which has often been a negative time for us, to improve the system.

- ❑ We can use our negatives for something positive.

And this is how we work:

- ❑ We have a range of regular forums and lived experience groups — this includes regional forums in the South, North, and Midlands, a women’s forum, and a forum for young adults.
- ❑ We work formally and informally, in person and online.
- ❑ We tap into our lived experience expertise for improved system change.
- ❑ We co-develop and co-design practices and policies alongside organisations.

As a member of the lived experience team, I have been involved, and continued to be involved in several projects with the NHS, MoJ, and Probation, as well as

other organisations linked to the criminal justice system. Far too many to list here.

However, I am proud to say I’m neurodivergent and one project I am involved in, is...since October 2021, along with five other members of our lived experience team, and as part of a working group, we have been working with a team from the MoJ on Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System. I don’t expect my peers who are neurodivergent to receive special treatment or that a neurodivergent condition is an excuse to commit crime, but what I do want to see is the criminal justice system making reasonable adjustments for people who come into contact with the system, especially for people who are neurodivergent. By being neuroinclusive, not only does it include everyone but it also removes the labels.

When we listen to the voices of those who have been impacted by the policies and practices of the criminal justice system, we can build a system that works for everyone.