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User Voice and the Prison Council Model:

A Summary of Key Findings from an Ethnographic Exploration of Participatory Governance in Three English Prisons

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Introduction

User Voice was established in 2009 ‘to foster dialogue between service providers and users that is mutually beneficial and results in better and more cost-effective services’¹. Its organizational philosophy, ‘Only offenders can stop re-offending’, communicates the importance of personal choice and individual responsibility in behaviour and action, whereas the broader ethos of support through advocacy and solution-focused problem-solving directs User Voice’s services and initiatives.

This study examines the User Voice prison council model that is currently operating in six prisons in England, Wales, and Ireland. The approach is distinguishable from other forms of prisoner representative councils or advocacy services in a number of ways: Firstly, User Voice is an outside, independent organisation contracted to each prison in order to develop, organize, and maintain each council. The organisation oversees the initial information and education process, encourages participation from both prisoners and staff, orchestrates the election phase, and provides ongoing support to ensure the council is kept active and accountable². Secondly, User Voice employs ex-offenders who can provide modeling and potential role models for prisoners, as well as an alternative way for them to relate to and engage with prison staff. In addition, the relationships and forum that are established via the unique insight of the organisation can better reflect genuine concerns of prisoners and staff. These concerns may range from resettlement planning to lifestyle changes, or to improvement of relationships within the prison. On Election Day, prisoners and staff will vote for their preferred ‘party’, rather than electing specific individuals avoiding personal agendas or staff nominating ‘favourites’. This model incorporates User Voice’s unique approach that is based on democratic values of equal representation and giving prisoners a voice, therefore enabling a focus on issues pertinent to the whole prison community. Finally, although User Voice has a specific curriculum and protocols for its council model, it remains flexible in its approach to the differing environments and specific needs of each prison.

An ethnographic style of research was employed using participant observation as the primary source of data collection. Over a three-month period, nearly 100 hours were spent in three English prisons — HMP Birmingham, HMYOI Aylesbury, and HMP Maidstone — observing User Voice employees, prison staff, and prisoners. This entailed interviews, small group discussions, as well as direct observation. The prisons were selected for their varying stages of council development. The researcher attempted to ‘experience’ the council from both a prisoner and staff member viewpoint, whilst examining changes within the environment as a whole.

Summary of Key Findings

The key theme emerging for prisoners, staff, and User Voice employees was that ‘the council is good for everyone’. Despite many staff initially expressing apprehension and at times outward hostility towards the council and how they perceived it to impact their workplace (e.g. increased power to prisoners, appeasement, or decreased recognition of staff needs), over time (after a council was established), anxieties lessened as positive outcomes began to emerge. A number of staff felt that their status within the prison hierarchy would suffer or be compromised as prisoners were given a stronger voice and increased ‘control’ over their environment. However, these anxieties diminished as staff saw that prisoners were concerned most about basic issues which when addressed increased their level of wellbeing by alleviating frustrations and uncertainty. This in turn improved staff-prisoner relationships and along with it job satisfaction.

Despite the personalized nature of responses, several themes were consistent across all three sites. For many prisoners, the council and participation in it assisted them in conceptualising a positive and productive identity with future-oriented aspirations. User Voice employees, whose ex-offender status revealed that ‘there can be a life outside of prison’, significantly aided this process. Second, by establishing a council that allowed prisoners to be recognized through constructive dialogue, efforts centred on community betterment

1. User Voice (2012) ‘Mission: What Do We Do?’. Available at: www.uservoice.org/about-us/mission/what-do-we-do/.

2. Contract lengths are typically one to two years.

allowed a sense of collective responsibility to be developed. This created an environment of inclusion and purpose, and impacted on the wider prison culture. Prisoner-staff relationships were reformulated on increased levels of recognition and trust, and many developed long-term faith that these relations would continue to get better, aided by the collaborative work needed to sustain the council. Lastly, the council enabled prisoners to feel more secure and certain in an often-unstable atmosphere, lessening tensions, anxiety, and increasing overall feelings of wellbeing.

Prisoner Identities

Throughout the study it became apparent that identity and the desire to 'feel human' and 'be treated like a person' were daily reflections for prisoners. Being recognised and included in the council and voting process gave prisoners the confidence to take responsibility for their environment and commit to making it a better place. Through council participation prisoners were given the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other, staff, and User Voice employees while elevating their 'prisoner' status to that of 'council member'.

Prisoners discussed how the council had assisted them in conceptualising themselves as people (beyond 'prisoners' or 'offenders'), and more importantly, as people that have value and worth. Participating in the council enabled them to construct new roles that they saw as productive, helpful, and beneficial to others. Research on desistance stresses the importance of helping offenders identify positive roles within their communities through which they can achieve status without offending³. As prisoners develop roles based on positive attributes rather than deficits, self-esteem is accrued, as is their sense of purpose and self worth.

Interviewer: How does participating in the council make you feel?

Prisoner: He is our party leader [pointing to another prisoner], so obviously it made me proud of him, but also proud of myself. It

makes us feel more mature and like we're accomplished and accomplishing stuff. 'Cause some people on the outside might think negatively of it [the council], but what we're actually doing is big 'cause we can actually make a change and once they see we're changin' stuff, we'll be able to say that we've done it, and we've changed too.

Nearly all prisoners interviewed discussed experiencing new feelings as a result of taking part in council activities. These feelings ranged from pride, usefulness, increased levels of confidence, to a greater sense of maturity ('I feel like I've grown up a lot').

Staff also noticed how many prisoners matured, setting examples for other prisoners on their wing. As one senior staff member noted: 'It's like they become ambassadors to others on their wing; now they're held accountable. It also means they have to step up and set a good example. And they do it!' This was particularly pronounced in HMYOI Aylesbury where the prisoners are referred to as 'boys' and 'lads'. These young offenders frequently found themselves in an on-going struggle to establish themselves as mature men and wanting to be treated as such by officers, but realising that acting out or 'kicking off' was at times the most expedient way to serve their needs. This in turn reinforced

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many officers' perceptions that 'these are immature youngsters, after all' therefore limiting expectations. However, other staff (particularly those working closest to the council) had elevated expectations of prisoners, allowing them to often challenge prisoners to 'step up' and meet them. This is consistent with Pryor's observations from his years as a prison governor: 'The more we see prisoners as people capable of behaving responsibly, the more we come to expect them to do so, and the greater the demand on prison staff to set new challenges to themselves and to those in their care⁴.'

Interactions and relationships with the User Voice employees who openly identified themselves as ex-offenders were particularly important to prisoners who wanted to 'reshape' their identity. This aspect of the council was perhaps the most powerful for prisoners, as they gained considerable insight and strength from this

3. Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
4. Pryor, S. (2001:1) *The Responsible Prisoner: An Exploration of the Extent to which Imprisonment Removes Responsibility Unnecessarily and an Invitation to Change*, London: HM Prison Service.

engagement, encouraging their pursuit and maintenance of positive new roles.

Knowing that as a lifer you can do something after jail, and not just do something that helps you, or keeps you out of jail. You can do something that keeps others from coming back to jail, while at the same time showing them about life on the outside and helping them while they're in jail. So yeah, it has shaped my perspective. (Prisoner)

The importance of the User Voice employees' ex-offender status was one of the most prominent themes amongst prisoners. This shared experience had significant value at every stage of council development and maintenance, and created legitimacy for the understanding between them, which also represented hope and a future outside of the prison. From this, heightened levels of trust and confidence were able to develop, further enhancing commitment and engagement in the council process.

A prisoner able to see ex-offenders living 'a good life' post-release was significant and meaningful. For many prisoners, especially those serving long sentences, encountering someone 'come out the other side' intact meant hope and a future outside.

Interviewer: And what if the User Voice guys weren't ex-offenders?

Prisoner: Well, it helps, you know? 'Cause we feel like we can relate to them, and if they wasn't, they'd be ignorant. They wouldn't know what it's like, you know? They've done their own bird, yeah, so they can tell us about their first-hand experience...It shows that if you're an ex-offender you can do something different; something positive.

This benefit was also recognised by staff:

The one thing that ex-lads [ex-offenders] add to any jail is that they add a lot of stability; a lot of influence. We always notice this because, what a lot of these lads here don't know is what's around the corner. They don't know

what to expect, and we're not very good at telling them, because actually, we don't know half the time...and they can actually see, 'oh, there is an end to it [specifically longlife sentences], there is something I can do'. That side of it is always positive; it always is.

Hope and future-oriented thinking, especially in prisons, is widely accepted to be fundamental to general wellbeing, ability to cope, and integral to the desistance process⁵. What was evident in observing and discussing these issues with prisoners was that hope and belief in 'a future' were enhanced through council participation. Prisoners observed what a future might look like through the User Voice employees who practised future-oriented thinking and planning. This combination of interaction with 'the product' of the engagement process, coupled with experiential exercises in forward thinking and goal setting, instilled a new or renewed sense of hope in many of these men.

Community

Sociological theories of community organisation stress the importance of collective will and the benefits of accrued social capital that are derived from the cooperation between individuals and groups⁶. User Voice employees were quick to point out that the goal of an active council is to benefit everyone and accordingly referred to it as 'prison-based' rather than 'prisoner-based'. This distinction was reiterated by a governor who indicated that he was initially attracted to this particular council model because 'it was about the wider prison' and 'wasn't just to cater to prisoners or staff, but everyone in the facility'. Fostering a sense of community and common consciousness through council work is built into the User Voice model, as it reflects a democratic process that promotes representation, shared goals, and collaborative effort toward shared objectives. As each member of the facility invests his or her time and knowledge into solution-focused action, loyalty, trust, commitment, and service enhancement is established and accrued.

Because staff and prisoners were able to recognize each other as valuable community members — each having a purpose and sharing goals — empathy and respect increased throughout the facilities. A notable aspect of this new relationship with their environment was the way prisoners were able to experience and feel

A prisoner able to see ex-offenders living 'a good life' post-release was significant and meaningful.

5. Hillbrand, M. and Young, J.L. (2008) 'Instilling Hope into Forensic Treatment: The Antidote to Despair and Desperation', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 36: 90-94.
6. Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

the reciprocity of having such responsibility and people that rely upon you. As one User Voice employee remarked:

I think one of the things that we do, is actually introduce people to a process that's kind of inherent to the way that we live in our society; the democratic process, that actually, people are not engaged with at a very young age, and don't become engaged with. However, through our process, they do become involved in that, and even if that engages them slightly with the larger democratic ethos and the democratic philosophies, then that may have impacts on the ways that they perceive their community on the outside.

Inclusion evokes not only a sense of belonging and purpose, but also responsibility. Prisoners were able to feel like their presence in the prison could be utilized in ways to better their facility and were now accountable for the decisions made and changes effected. From my observations, participating in the council and being included in the 'solution' was a transformative experience for prisoners. For many of these men, they had been told their whole lives that they were 'not worth anything' or that they have nothing to contribute; taking part in the council and constructing problem-solving proposals converted them from a 'community liability' to a 'community asset'. User Voice employees indicated, when I asked about their own journeys through the system and leaving a criminal past behind, that recognizing previously denied self-worth can be the first step toward taking responsibility for building a different life, one in which the offender is no longer 'not worth anything', but instead can become an agent for positive change.

As social, political, and administrative exclusion impacts an individual's ability to actively participate in their community and government, a deeper sense of loss of agency persists. Research has demonstrated that desistance is linked to agency and social bonds⁷, and according to Farrall and his colleagues, 'research has taught us that most repeat offenders who wish to desist see the process of desistance as a way of charting a path

towards greater social inclusion in 'mainstream'⁸.' The journey from exclusion to inclusion then requires the ability to exert agency through the formation and execution of decisions and the acceptance of responsibility. The literature also suggests that in addition to work and family, another area of 'identity transformation for returning prisoners is that of responsible citizen, including varieties of civic participation such as voting, volunteer work, 'giving back', and neighbourhood involvement⁹.'

In the context of the council, prisoner empowerment enables them to generate, organize, and articulate solution-focused arguments that address concerns that impact the entire institution. This allows them to become stakeholders in their community and environment, and mutually accountable for the consequences of their actions.

It has long been recognized that staff-prisoner relations are at the heart of prison life.

Interviewer: What do you think prisoners can gain from participating in the council?

Staff Member: I think there's the confidence thing, there's the bit about maturity and responsibility, but I think it's the bit about, um, what do you call it, taking that social responsibility. To say actually, I'm going to put myself out,

I'm going to do some work, and I'm actually going to try and make this place better. There is the bit about debating, which is interesting. They'll obviously learn that they haven't got to be right all of the time, and there will be times when it's better to just let someone else push through something, rather than their own agenda because it's for the greater good. But I think it's that bit about, the main thing about responsibility; the responsibility to act as a party, as a member of a party, the responsibility to listen and act appropriately at the council with each other.

Staff-Prisoner Relationships

It has long been recognized that staff-prisoner relations are at the heart of prison life. These relationships are complex, often predicated upon surprising levels of mutual discretion, trust, and dependence. It is from getting these relations right that

7. Bottoms, A. (2006) 'Desistance, Social Bonds and Human Agency: A Theoretical Exploration', in Wikstrom, P.O.H. and Sampson, R.J. (eds), *The Explanation of Crime: Context, Mechanisms and Development* (pp. 243-290), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Farrall, S., Bottoms, A. and Shapland, J. (2010:547) 'Social Structures and Desistance from Crime', *European Journal of Criminology* 7(6): 546-570.
9. Visher, C.A. and Travis, J. (2003:97) 'Transitions from Prison to Community: Understanding Individual Pathways', *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 89-113.

decency and balanced levels of care and custody are established. Improving these relationships by humanizing the 'other' through collaborative effort and productive dialogue has great potential for creating a more humane environment with positive regimes. As one senior staff member noted, 'at the end of the day, everybody's in this pot together and we all need to sort things out together.' These themes were prominent amongst both prisoners and staff, and emerged (to varying degrees) from general observations at each prison.

Important to note is how perceptions of staff-prisoner relations varied considerably between prisons, in large part due to their stage in council development. In the pre-council phase at HMP Birmingham, many staff expressed frustration and anger over the council's imminent implementation. Several officers feared that this type of forum would be giving prisoners too much power:

You know, they're in here for a reason. They shouldn't be rewarded for that.

They can't just start requesting whatever they want...that's not how prison works.

These statements also highlight undercurrents of resentment, punitive values, and a belief that prisoners did not deserve to have a voice. Staff expressed similar sentiments and a deep contempt towards the council model prior to its enactment at HMYOI Aylesbury. However, as reality replaced misconstrued visions of prisoners 'running the prison', it became evident that the council and its activity were reasonable, feasible, and an asset to the whole establishment. Very few staff at Aylesbury or Maidstone talked about the council in terms of giving prisoners 'power'. Staff were better able to recognize that the council was an effective tool to gather information, disseminate information, and have a civil, often professional, dialogue concerning issues within the facility. This was most visible at Maidstone, where a considerable number of administrative staff participate in the monthly council meetings and regularly consult party members for feedback on upcoming or on going initiatives. One former senior staff member recalled his experience with the then newly established council at Maidstone:

This increased patience and feelings of empathy on both sides, as both parties were able to better understand the struggles of the other.

It being a new-ish concept, there was doubt whether it would actually work. However, this can be similar for all new concepts, and once User Voice were in, staff quickly realized that the system used directs offenders to act, vote, discuss matters reasonably. It was very much welcomed once embedded. It also gave offenders direction, a purpose, responsibility, and staff saw the positive influence and welcomed it from then on.

Although not stated outright, it was apparent from observations and conversation that the staff and prisoners who worked together on the council shared a unique experience and their subsequent interactions were framed differently. Staff now viewed prisoners as

productive and useful because they were directing their energy towards constructive action. Participating in the council allowed prisoners to get a glimpse of prison bureaucracy, which gave them a new understanding of how officers were often limited in their ability to get things done and restricted by administrative hurdles. This increased patience and feelings of empathy on both sides, as both parties were able to better understand the struggles of the other. Pompa argues that dialogue breaks down barriers and

stereotypes, especially when working towards a common goal¹⁰. This was present amongst prisoners and staff, many of whom saw each in a new light after regularly engaging in discussions with them. One User Voice employee echoed this when he said:

But already you can see that those guys, and there are some real problems with some of those people, but with those guys, they are already beginning to work together. But they take that back to the wings, do you know what I mean? They take all those motives, those things that work, that ethos, away from the council process, that's one thing. But also, breaking down those barriers between the con and staff, and making cons and staff work together a little bit better, I think is also something that arises out of the council. You can see that once those barriers are broken down even just a little bit, that actually, the relationships are better.

10. Pompa, L. (2011) 'Breaking Down the Walls: Inside-Out Learning and the Pedagogy of Transformation', in Hartnett, S.J. (ed), *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives* (pp. 253-272), Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

From engaging together on the council, staff got to know prisoners 'as a person, not just a prisoner', while prisoners were better able to understand the pressure and constraints staff worked under. As a result, empathy flowed from these new dynamics, which increased mutual respect in the facilities with established councils. Prisoners were quick to point out the difference in how staff now interacted with them:

Interviewer: Do you think the council could impact things like staff-prisoner relationships?

Prisoner: Well, I've seen a lot of changes already in the ways that staff react around me and react around other prisoners on the council.

Interviewer: What kind of changes?

Prisoner: Well, they show me a lot more respect now and they're being more polite to me; they treat me more like an individual.

Overcoming barriers to success

Although the councils were overwhelmingly perceived as beneficial, there were four consistently identified impediments to a council's success. First, the governor's level of commitment was critical to setting the tone for the introduction, implementation, and on going legitimacy of the council. Staff and prisoners were acutely aware of how dedicated the governor was by the messages (explicit and otherwise) sent out. Second, and similarly, staff must be accepting of, and engaged with, the project throughout each stage of development. Toch suggests that 'in prisons, we must also worry about the impact on staff of what we do with inmates. It is axiomatic that prisoner participation in the absence of staff participation lowers morale¹¹.' As the council is *prison*-based, it is essential that all members of the prison community are given the opportunity to participate and have their voice heard. Third, the council needs to maintain its legitimacy and effectiveness by regularly

generating positive changes, and ensuring that others understand that these changes are attributed to the council. This keeps the council accountable and its achievements visible. Lastly, User Voice needs to offer consistent support and guidance to each site and to their staff. This had been an issue at Maidstone where User Voice had faced considerable staff turnover during the previous year. Because the relationship between User Voice employees and prisoners is so meaningful, this consistency is crucial in keeping them engaged. Moreover, it is also important for prison staff to view User Voice, the organisation and employees, as professional and reliable.

Conclusion

This study examined how User Voice and their council model impacts the prison, prisoners and staff. The research suggests that there are powerful and important changes for both individuals and institutions. It is apparent that a working council acts in a holistic way, with the ability to support positive transformation in prison and promote personal responsibility, collaborative work between prisoners and staff, and improve systemic functioning. Treating prisoners as citizens — people with value, worth, and purpose that can productively contribute to their communities has already been shown to reduce recidivism and improve prison functioning without the need to compromise security or custodial obligations, the User Voice council can make a significant contribution to this process. Enabling prisoners to reconceptualise their identities through new and positive roles increases personal and collective accountability and lessens dependence on the institution. A User Voice council has significant implications for prison life and reversing potentially damaging penal practices of identity stripping through 'civic death' and forced helplessness. Indeed, preparing prisoners for re-entry to society requires interventions that promote civic bonds through the fostering of mutual obligations and commitments to mainstream values.

11. Toch (1994:68)'Democratizing Prisons', *The Prison Journal* 73(1): 62-72.