

# Involving People with Lived Experience in Prison and Probation: Some Milestones in the Journey so far

*Ruth Walters is the Lived Experience Engagement Lead in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service's Insights Group*

**The value of lived experience engagement and involvement is recognised by an increasing number of organisations and sectors. The Prison and Probation service in England and Wales has what could be described as a unique challenge in this, based on the potential view that our primary role is to punish people convicted of crime and protect the public, and that people with experience of our services have lost the right to be heard or involved in our work, by virtue of their offending. This is a significant and ongoing challenge. Additionally, engaging and involving those who have experience of our services is not straightforward — it requires new processes, norms and practices that take time to learn, develop and embed in a very large and complex organisation — essentially it requires a culture change. However, the efforts of a growing number of lived experience engagement 'champions' in the Prison and Probation Service, along with the unstinting generosity of our partner organisations in sharing their knowledge and expertise, has helped build a commitment to a lived experience engagement culture which is now stronger than ever.**

The journey to engaging and involving people in prison and on probation in our wider work is both challenging and exciting in equal measure. In the last four years we have achieved some key milestones in this journey. This article seeks to share some of these, including the creation of national lived experience engagement standards and products, delivery of lived experience engagement events, and the creation of a national lived experience engagement network. The article also covers some of the growing areas of good practice in prisons and probation settings, focussing more fully on prisons though, along with some of our future plans to build on and strengthen this. This article is written from the viewpoint of the Insights Lived Experience Engagement Team, and is by no means exhaustive, as it would be impossible to reflect all of

the wealth and breadth of lived experience engagement and involvement work currently taking place across our prisons and probation areas.

The lived experience engagement and involvement landscape in prisons and probation is varied and evolving, driven and shaped by a range of policy initiatives and operational needs; it is linked to diversity, equality, respect and rehabilitation, and also captured in our HMPPS Strategy Commitments to enabling people to be their best, building an open and learning culture and transforming through partnership.<sup>1</sup> In practice, it covers a range of consultation and involvement opportunities, including individual and group consultations, lived experience panels and forums, peer-led activities, and lived experience involvement in decision-making, such as service design, reviews, and staff recruitment and development.

## Striving for excellence

In the last four years a growing number of people have helped to build on and share the many engagement and involvement successes in our prisons and in the community. Translating these individual successes into a wider culture of engagement and involvement across all of probation and prisons, remains one of our key challenges. An important milestone in making progress with this was developing and agreeing the HMPPS Standards of Excellence for our lived experience engagement work. These standards are the first step in articulating a corporate commitment to excellence across the main settings and contexts in which lived experience engagement can take place (see Table 1).

As a given, the design and development of these standards needed to be led by those with experience of our services. To help with this, the Lived Experience Engagement Lead in the Insights Group, convened an advisory group comprising individuals with experience of our services as well as user-led organisations working in the criminal justice sector; the Service User Advisory

1. HMPPS Business Strategy. (2019). Shaping our future. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hmpps-business-strategy-shaping-our-future>

Group (SUAG) was formed,<sup>2</sup> later becoming the Lived Experience Engagement Network (LEEN).<sup>3</sup> It grew rapidly into a hugely energetic and supportive network of individuals and organisations committed to lived experience involvement in criminal justice services, and the Standards of Excellence became the first of many elements of our work which the LEEN continues to help us design, develop and deliver. Along with our partners, a good range of prison and probation colleagues and representatives from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation are also part of the network. The collaboration and partnership working the network engenders remains instrumental to progressing our lived experience engagement work in prisons and probation — with over 30 different organisations regularly represented, and over 200 individuals participating in the last year alone.

During August and September 2018, members of the newly formed SUAG facilitated service user consultation in both prisons and the community, to help inform what was then called a ‘proposed national framework for engagement and involvement work’. Nearly 250 people with lived experience of our services were consulted with, and one of the clearest messages we received was to strive for excellence, with the SUAG strongly encouraging us in a similar vein. Drawing on the UK Customer Service Excellence Standard and the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model a set of seven standards were

developed, which were also shaped by the expectations of the prison and probation Inspectorates.<sup>4 5</sup> The standards were designed to apply in one-to-one settings, group-based engagement, and work to involve people who use our services across the whole organisation, including those who are less likely to engage.

From their inception, the standards have been offered as a helpful starting point, or a tool, for colleagues to consider where they are currently, and where they might like to go, in terms of engaging with people using our services. We have deliberately held off from mandating use of the standards, seeking always to use them as part of a ‘hearts and minds’ approach which encourages colleagues to see the benefits of engaging with people who use our services, and perhaps more importantly, helping colleagues to understand the importance of doing this work well. Piloting the standards with a small number of prisons and all our regional probation colleagues saw them welcomed as a framework on which to build a more coherent approach to engaging and involving people using our services in our wider work, and this is primarily how they have been used ever since. For example, some prisons have used them to shape how they respond to HMI Prisons’ expectations of lived experience engagement, and every probation region has used them as a framework for their Regional Engaging with People on Probation Action Plans.

Table 1: HMPPS Lived Experience Engagement Standards of Excellence

<b>Ensuring people on probation and in prison actively contribute to the planning and review of their progress and wider progress:</b>	
<b>1</b>	All staff are skilled and competent in involving people on probation and in prison in planning and reviewing their activities, sentence planning and wider rehabilitation activities.
<b>2</b>	People on probation and in prison have been actively involved in the development of their activities, sentence planning and wider rehabilitation activities.
<b>Securing feedback from people on probation and in prison on which interventions most help them, and how these could be improved at a wider level:</b>	
<b>3</b>	Robust methods for securing good insight into the needs of people on probation and in prison are in place and used regularly.
<b>4</b>	Opportunities for input are provided to enable people on probation and in prison to influence which interventions work best for them and others.

2. Partnership members of the SUAG: Clinks; Criminal Justice Alliance Interserve; Nacro; Prison Reform Trust; Probation institute; Revolving Doors Agency; Seetec; St Giles Trust; User Voice.  
 3. Partnership Member of the LEEN: Beyond Recovery; Breakthrough; BTEG; BtheChange; Care Leavers Association (MOJ); Clinks; Criminal Justice Alliance; DWRM Consultants CIC; EP:IC; HMI Probation; Interventions Alliance; Ingeus; Intuitive Thinking Skills; Leaders Unlocked; Nacro; People Power Partnership; Prison Reform Trust; Prisoner Learning Alliance; Probation Institute; Revolving Doors Agency; Standout; St Giles Trust; Switchback; Traveller Movement; Thezmt; Unlocking Potential; User Voice; The Wise Group; Working Chance; ZMT.  
 4. Customer Service Excellence Standard. (2008). <https://www.customerserviceexcellence.uk.com/about-the-standard/customer-service-excellence-standard/>  
 5. The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model. (1992). <https://www.efqm.org/the-efqm-model/>

<b>Involving people on probation and in prison in key stages of service design, development and delivery:</b>	
<b>5</b>	There is clear evidence of the influence and impact of involving people on probation and in prison in service design, development and delivery at a strategic / organisational level.
<b>6</b>	Opportunities for people on probation and in prison to assist with service review and development, as well as opportunities to co-deliver services, are actively sought and realised where possible.
<b>7</b>	A system-wide effort is made to engage with a diversity of people on probation and in prison, including those from specific and under-represented groups, with evidence of a tailored response to their needs (consistent with the Equality Act 2010).

As we developed and piloted the standards, the need for a Toolkit to help colleagues turn these standards into operational reality emerged pretty swiftly, and the same SUAG operational group which had developed the standards, undertook an enormous piece of work to pull together a Lived Experience Engagement Toolkit. The Toolkit includes nearly 40 checklists, guides, templates and examples of good practice, as well as links to further support. It covers topics such as writing an engagement strategy, ethics and governance, working in groups, reward and recognition, and measuring impact and evaluation. The Toolkit was finalised in March 2019, just as the UK went into the first Covid-19 related lockdown, which limited its initial take up and use, and it is currently being refreshed as part of ongoing work to strengthen lived experience engagement in both prison and probation settings.

**Promoting the voice of people who use our services: Insights in Action**

The Insights Lived Experience Engagement Team has facilitated a considerable amount of the work to improve and strengthen how we consult with and hear from people who use our services, to help make the routes we use to gather lived experience insights as robust and representative as possible. As this improvement journey continues, a range of ongoing opportunities are being developed across prisons and probation settings, to secure more immediate lived experience insights and help us maintain this perspective in our work.

In the last four years we have undertaken over 50 of what we have called ‘Insights in Action’ events and initiatives created, in most instances, through work with our partners in the LEEN, and delivered as lived experience events in the HMPPS Insights Festival.<sup>6</sup> These events and initiatives enable us and colleagues across the Service to access some real-time perspectives and insights of people with lived experience, and use these

to shape and influence our ongoing work, and strengthen our engagement and involvement routes and mechanisms.

As part of the first Insights Festival in 2019, the Insights Lived Experience Engagement Team co-hosted a joint research symposium with the Probation Institute, which brought together practitioners, policy makers and people with lived experience of our services, to share inspiring examples of joint work, and to consider how we can do more of this. The event was attended by 60 people from across the criminal justice system, many of whom had lived experience of our services, and the wide-ranging discussion and debate on the day provided inspiration and challenge to us all. Key messages included the paramount importance of building trust, treating people in procedurally just ways, and taking a diversity of approaches. This first Insights Festival offered opportunities for people to join lived experience consultation groups taking place throughout the country, as well as a chance to meet with some key champions of lived experience engagement work in prisons. Since that first Festival, lived experience events have become a valued and every-growing part of the programme. In 2022 Insights Festival offered 30 events with a lived experience engagement focus. Just under 1,000 people signed up to these events, which provided opportunities to hear lived experience perspectives on a range of issues, including county lines and gangs, gambling, and the experience of leaving care. Attendees heard about life-changing journeys such as ‘From Probation to Peer Mentor’, as well participating in events which considered thorny, yet compelling issues, such as whether all marginalised voices deserve to be heard.

Since its inception in early 2018, members of the LEEN network have also actively considered and shaped a range of wider work. For example, the LEEN helped us develop aspects of our Probation Reform Programme; our National Drug and Alcohol Strategy; a post-unification Resettlement Pack; and the national Plan for Engaging with People on Probation. The LEEN has also

6. See: [www.hmppsinsights.co.uk/insights-festival/](http://www.hmppsinsights.co.uk/insights-festival/)

helped us consider complex issues, such as the language and terminology we use, leading us to more consistently adopt the terms 'people on probation', 'people in prison' and 'people with lived experience'.

While we continue to build our lived experience engagement and involvement routes within Prisons and Probation, the Insights Lived Experience Engagement Team has developed a compendium of the most recent lived experience reports and consultations, to help us wherever possible to take account of this work in our ongoing service design, development, delivery, and review. The compendium currently comprises 39 reports undertaken by 16 different organisations,<sup>7</sup> who have spoken to a total 6,732 people in prison or on probation. Whilst the compendium is mostly used by the Insights Group to ensure our work takes good account of the lived experience perspective, other parts of HMPPS are starting to access it, and we hope to build on this and encourage wider use of the compendium over the next year.

There is still considerable room for further development of the ways we hear the voice of people who use our services, however, the last four years has undoubtedly seen some good progress made, and work will continue to build on the promising achievements made so far.

### **National and local work to engage and include people in prison**

In addition to the aforementioned work and progress, there are longer-standing local and central initiatives in the Prison Service which aim to engage and involve people in custody in how prisons operate.

There is a requirement for all prisons to have Prison Councils; some prisons also have Health Councils with prison resident representatives. Well-run Councils can be opportunities for people in prison to raise and work to address day-to-day concerns and frustrations, as well as influence and lead on longer-term work. Prison Councils can deliver considerable 'quick wins', often related to relatively basic but crucial elements of prison life, such as facilities, canteen, and family visits. In some

instances, consultation on more strategic and longer-term issues has resulted in people in prison identifying new and highly valued initiatives. For example, prison farms, gardens and wildlife projects (e.g. bee-keeping), often led by people in prisons themselves, can have a transformational effect on those involved, providing a sense of pride and purpose whilst developing a whole range of new skills and experiences.<sup>8</sup>

People in prison have also led initiatives to celebrate success and recognise the efforts and achievements of individuals or groups — both staff and people in prison. Initiatives such as 'shout outs' and in-house awards schemes have enabled people to highlight what they value and want to recognise, and how this should be done. This may be one way to help to begin breaking down the 'them and us' divide between staff and those living in custody.

A number of prisons have community hubs set up and run by people in prison which provide information and informal support on a whole range of aspects of prison life. The informal support offered by these hubs, as well as from peer-led befriending and listening services, can make an important contribution to the overall health and well-being of the wider prison population. In other instances, more practical challenges have been tackled, with people in prison assisting

with issues such as maintaining health and safety, helping to refresh prison policies and procedures, or ensuring HM Inspectorate requirements are being met (e.g. in relation to noticeboard content and signage).

Charitable work and fundraisers provide people in prison with opportunities to develop and lead on initiatives and activities that aim to help others. During Covid-19, people in prison undertook exercise challenges to raise funds for Care Homes and the NHS, with fundraisers running distances to/up landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, Niagara Falls, and Mount Everest. More generally, Remembrance Day Displays have been created to raise funds for the British Legion, and people in prison have organised tuck boxes to be sent to serving members of the armed forces. People in prison have also used their time in industry workshops

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7. Organisations with publications in the Insights Compendium: Advance; Clinks - RR3 Group; Criminal Justice Alliance; EP:IC; HMI Probation; IAPDC & Prison Radio; KSS CRC; Merseyside CRC; Oxford University; People Power Partnership; Prison Reform Solutions; Prison Reform Trust; Prisoner Learning Alliance; Revolving Doors Agency; User Voice; ZMT.
8. Farrier, A., Baybutt, M., & Dooris, M. (2019). Mental Health and Wellbeing Benefits from a Prisons Horticultural Programme. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 15(1), 91-104.

to do good, making PPE for health workers during Covid-19, and in one instance, providing refurbished bikes to a local school after learning that more than 20 of theirs had been stolen.

People in prison have proven invaluable in supporting communication across the prison, with prison representative roles providing a two-way route between staff and people in prisons, sharing updates and feedback on a wide range of issues. During Covid-19, this proved vital. Where it worked well, this assistance with communication helped to keep people on the wings updated, informed and where possible, re-assured. At a national level, during the pandemic the lived experience consultation groups and representatives played a role in shaping our response to the ongoing crises and our work to build back better. We were able to use this insight to highlight key issues in briefings to senior leaders, in particular about how communicating clearly and in a timely and procedurally just manner was critical.

Also centrally, prisoner forums are run by the national HMPPS Change Delivery and Central Services Group to shape and inform national change programmes in prisons. This consultation has helped HMPPS to evaluate how effectively change is being rolled out and embedded across the estate. In recent months, the forums have supported work to develop Offender Management in Custody, in-cell telephony, in-cell technology, and the work of the Race Action Programme.

Our national assurance programme includes routine use of the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) survey, a rolling programme since 2003 that periodically surveys each prison's quality of life. The MQPL was designed and constructed by the Prisons Research Centre to measure relatively stable latent constructs that cannot otherwise be observed; for example, respect, fairness, bureaucratic legitimacy and personal autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Prisoners' responses are made meaningful by

comparing them to what we might typically expect from other establishments of the same functional type. To further understand the reasons behind responses provided, and give prisoners further voice about aspects of their experience that are the most important to them, survey participants are invited to join focus groups, or to submit individual written comments. As well as providing each prison with this management information about their own establishment, the HMPPS MQPL Team analyses and reports trends from across the estate and over time. To help make prisons accountable, MQPL scores contribute to the national Prison Performance Tool.

This range of multi-faceted engagement with people in prison will continue to evolve and grow as our commitment to engaging with people in prison builds, and we take opportunities to share and learn from examples of good practice.

#### **The way forward for Lived Experience Engagement in Prisons**

There are many excellent examples of how and when engagement and consultation takes place with people in prisons, but practice nationally remains varied. Our ambition is to build on the good practice already in place, growing this across all of our prisons, and maximising its impact and reach wherever we can.

National work led by the culture team in the Transforming Delivery in Prisons Programme is playing a key role in this, with the voice of people in prison identified as a central component of developing positive prison cultures. In the last six months we have spoken with 120 people in custody about their experience and perspectives of prison culture. In the word cloud below (Figure 1), diversity, equality, community, respect, and relationships emerged as most important to the respondents — which we believe further strengthens the case for involving and engaging people in prisons wherever we can.

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9. Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2002). *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life*. Research Findings 174. London: Home Office.

Figure 1: What matters in Prison Culture: The Perspective of People in Prison



Work in the culture programme to promote the voice of people in prisons will initially focus on 12 pilot sites, and it will:

- ❑ Support prisons to develop a range of engagement and involvement work which meets the needs of their establishment, drawing on and sharing current good practice, including trialling a reverse mentoring scheme.
- ❑ Create a bank of examples of good practice and share this more widely across the estate.
- ❑ Build on the existing lived experience engagement toolkit to offer a range of tools and learning products, piloting these initially with a view to then offering them out to other prisons.
- ❑ Capture and share a range of stories told by people in prisons, which offer personal and compelling accounts of hope and transformation.
- ❑ Work with colleagues in other parts of HMPPS to develop opportunities for people with lived experience to be directly employed in paid roles in prisons.

The benefits of lived experience engagement, for both organisations and individuals, have been well summarised by members of the HMPPS Evidence-Based Practice Team.<sup>10</sup> In their evidence summary on Engagement and Co-production with People with Lived

Experience of Prison and Probation the benefits of such activities include:

- ❑ enabling voice and enhancing a sense of fairness
- ❑ improving relationships amongst peer groups and with professionals
- ❑ influencing culture change
- ❑ role-modelling and reinforcing citizenship
- ❑ giving hope and autonomy
- ❑ creating opportunities to support processes of desistance
- ❑ demonstrating an inclusive and responsive approach in using different methods, channels and media for different groups

While there is a growing recognition of these benefits across our prison and probation service, our lived experience engagement and involvement work will continue to be shaped by the changing needs of the people who use our services, as well as the priorities of our stakeholders at every level, including ministerial. As Martin Luther King famously said 'the time is always right to do what is right', and I am increasingly confident that in the coming years more and more colleagues and people with lived experience of our services will help us to build our understanding and appreciation of the importance of lived experience engagement and involvement, and support us to actively embrace this at every level in our organisation.

10. This summary is published in this same edition of the Prison Service Journal.