

Service User Engagement and Participation in HM Inspectorate of Probation

Karen Kendall is the Participation Lead in HM Inspectorate of Probation. She is interviewed by Dr Marcia Morgan, Health and Social Care Services Senior Lead in HM Prison and Probation Service, and co-editor of the Prison Service Journal.

Karen Kendall has been in post since December 2020. This is the dedicated role for participation activity that focuses on service user engagement. Her role involves supporting participation activity that takes part across all of probation inspections — adult core inspections, youth inspections and thematic inspections.

This interview took place May 2022.

MM: What made you decide to apply for this role?

I have a long history of working in third sector organisations in and around the criminal justice system and working with individuals who are living with and experiencing challenging circumstances.

My experience was that third sector organisations have a good history around service user engagement activity. Third sector organisations are ahead of the curve in comparison to statutory agencies when it came to service user engagement. I think this is in part due to the need to demonstrate service user engagement activity when they are tendering for contracts. Prior to my current role I worked for a national social housing provider in a tenant engagement role.

Here at HM Inspectorate of Probation we want to hear the voice of people on probation because they are experts in their own experiences, and they need to be an active participant in the identification of what works for them and what is beneficial for them. Therefore, when we are thinking about delivering targeted and effective services, I would strongly advocate for service users to be involved.

MM: Can you define engagement and co-production?

At HM Inspectorate of Probation, we use the principles of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation in our service user engagement strategy.^{1,2} Using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation to measure our progress at present, I believe we are at the information and consultation stage, as we are consulting with people on probation, people in prison and others who have had direct experience of the criminal justice system.

I feel that at our current position — consultation shown on the Arnstein's Ladder of Participation is being delivered well. We understand the power barrier that our role brings with it and have acted accordingly. We recruit external organisations who are run by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system, who act as consultants, to facilitate the interviewing and to do our surveying with participants. This approach I feel underlines not only the organisation's commitment but also our understanding of the potential barriers to engagement, we bring with us to the inspection process. We are very committed to finding ways to overcome the numerous barriers to effective engagement.

Co-production on the other hand is the next level of participation, as well as engaging in the strategic planning of the services. Here at HM Inspectorate of Probation, for example, we are driven by our standards, we have a set of published standards that we inspect against. For me, co-production would involve people on probation being involved in developing some of those standards.

MM: Is there a crossover between engagement and co-production?

Yes, there is a crossover. We have a service user engagement strategy that was implemented in 2019. This strategy provided an overview of the organisation's approach to service user engagement. In relation to what we want to be; how we want to engage; and

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1. Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
 2. HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019). Service User Engagement Strategy 2019 – 2022 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/09/Service-User-Engagement-Strategy.pdf>

what that would entail. We are however, at the start of our co-production journey.

The co-production aspect is a challenge for all statutory organisations in general, but perhaps especially so within the criminal justice system. There are a lot of issues around power sharing within the criminal justice system. A major challenge is how we can build co-production at the very top layer of strategic thinking within statutory organisations, and ensure it carries the necessary weight to impact the policy change that might be required.

MM: As you have touched on the issue of power relations, how do you envisage this approach alleviating the dynamics that are caused by the power relations that exist between people with lived experience and those who are managing them in the community?

It can be a real challenge; it is probably one of the biggest barriers for us. It has a significant impact on both the quantity and quality of feedback we have been able to gather in the past. Before commissioning the services of lived experience organisations, internal inspection staff carried out the interviews. Our staff are a highly professional and capable team who are incredibly motivated to capture feedback. Unfortunately, the title of Inspector of Probation is very formal and potentially created barriers. Evidenced by some feedback we received that highlighted suspicion of who the caller was, whether we were working for probation, or would the views be 'fed back' to the Probation Service?

Furthermore, during our youth inspections, we speak to children and their parents and carers. I am aware of instances where we have been mistaken for the police, or Inspectors for the Police Service.

Inspections by their nature are a very formal process and we work within the Ministry of Justice. A common concern raised by participants is the fear about speaking to staff within the Inspectorate, or from any criminal justice based formal statutory organisation. There is also the fear of saying the wrong thing, and the fear they could be sent to prison, or have their licence revoked. This is understandably a very real and significant issue. This was one of the drivers that really forced us to work hard to find ways to overcome these barriers and reassure participants.

At the start of this year, we commissioned an organisation to facilitate service user interviews, as part of the core inspection on our behalf. User Voice was the successful organisation, and they will be conducting the interviews for us in our future inspection programme.

MM: Considering the challenges that exist when building trust between people with lived experience and the HM Inspectorate of Probation. How do you maintain the integrity of having a diverse representation of people you are co-producing/engaging with to ensure the views are representative of the diversity of people with lived experience?

We have a real commitment to providing opportunities for service users to share their opinion and feedback in a variety of different ways. We understand that one size fits all approach does not work in terms of obtaining feedback.

During the pandemic we paused our adult core inspection activity, although we were quickly able to adapt to remote inspections for our Youth Inspections and Thematic inspections. We commenced remote adult core inspections in Wales in the Autumn of 2021.

I anticipate that the first onsite inspection will provide us with better engagement opportunities, to be able to speak to people face to face. This will

provide people with a variety of opportunities to have their say, either in person, over the phone, or via an online survey. We plan to work closely with the probation delivery units and those who have lead responsibility for engagement and participation.

User Voice have identified opportunities to meet participants in locations away from probation offices and approved premises. Meetings will take place in drop-in centres, or with unpaid work groups, to identify people who would perhaps usually be less visible to us on inspection.

We will endeavour to make the inspection process more accessible, flexible, adaptable, and provide multiple opportunities as we are committed to seeking a more diverse range of voices. Notwithstanding, we are constantly reviewing the approach taken.

We have developed an excellent relationship with the Lived Experience Engagement Network (LEEN) within the Insight's team at HMPPS. Being part of the network means we can be part of a wider and

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continually evolving conversation, about how we can ensure that the views we are gathering, reflect the diverse nature of those whose feedback we are seeking.

MM: This leads me onto the next question. What does success look like and how will success be measured?

From an individual perspective success will look like people seeing their feedback in our reports. In Autumn 2021, we started our new cycle of inspections in Wales. We held online focus groups. We also received feedback from service users who completed surveys by text or telephone. We then met with the focus group participants after the report was published and talked through the results and the report.

One participant was excited to see his comment in the report. He stated, "I can see that you've quoted me, I remember saying that because they are my actual words." This is success because this participant was able to see their feedback, word for word in a published report.

A measurement of success will be when we can identify voices that traditionally tend to be missing from the inspection process. When we start to see a diverse range of feedback coming through from those with neurodiverse conditions, or people living with a language disorder for example, alongside participants who we might generally expect to respond to surveys, this will also be a measurement of success.

There is also a quantitative aspect to measuring success as we aim to meet our target figures, for example, aiming for 15 per cent survey responses. Although naturally limiting, quantitative responses can be useful too when data can be gathered in larger numbers.

MM: You have spoken passionately about engagement and co-production and how it stems from your previous role. Can you describe the emotional labour that was involved in starting the engagement process, during the pandemic?

It has been really challenging especially as I started my role during the pandemic, which was not an ideal start. I also found working from home quite isolating, especially when you are trying to build new

relationships, network and establish stakeholder relationships, which was quite challenging.

A big part of our working life often involves being around people in a shared space, where you can hear what is going on around you, while having people around you to bounce ideas off. One of the positives to come from the pandemic was the improvement of IT capabilities. I was able to have lots of meetings in close succession with different people on Teams.

The impact of pausing core inspection activity was a challenge for me in my new role. There was a lot of planning during the procurement contract period that would have really been helped by some first-hand experience of the inspection process. It felt like it was a long process and at times somewhat frustrating, as I was new to procurement.

I appreciate however the importance of establishing a clear specification for what we are looking for. This will ensure that the appointed organisation is able to deliver this important piece of work on our behalf. We wanted to develop a collaborative working relationship with the appointed organisation where we could join lived and learned experience, to deliver the best opportunity to hear the voices of people on probation.

The procurement exercise would not have been my first choice of activity to lead on. However, seeing the final product, the specification, and to see the work that we put into the thinking around what we were looking for, and how that really enabled us to be able to commission an organisation that

really aligned with our values, was very powerful and satisfying.

Quality is the golden thread through all of this. We want to provide quality opportunities for people to be able to provide quality feedback that will inform our reports, which will in turn provide opportunities for feedback to drive improvements. I am determined that we are not tokenistic and that we are not just in it for the quick wins, or to get 15 per cent survey responses. We want it to be about quality as well as quantity.

MM: You mentioned wanting to avoid the perceived tokenistic gesture that participants may feel when involved in the consultation process. A thought came to mind in relation to Audrey

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Lorde's famous quote 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' Will HMPPS get to a point where people with lived experience could be an active member of the Executive Board, where they could be part of the decision-making process and we would see co-production at the highest level in the organisation?

I would hope that we would. I'm a great believer in the benefits of shadow management boards as this has the potential to add real co-production value. It's certainly something that I have had experience of before in a previous role. I think it is going to be a challenge for us as an organisation in terms of being HM Inspectorate of Probation and how we might be able to overcome some of the perceived barriers and adopt such an approach. What I will say is that we are very committed to explore the opportunities for what co-production could look like within the Inspectorate.

We are currently working in partnership with the University of Nottingham to host a PhD student, who will be exploring service user involvement within probation inspections. This study will explore what co-production could look like at HM Inspectorate of Probation and no doubt highlight potential challenges and barriers, as well as provide a rich source of learning for the Inspectorate.

In the past, service user engagement activity often felt like you were knocking on a closed door, or an add-on piece of work at the end of a project, or worse a tick box exercise. There is now a real appetite for exploring co-production, especially now that participation activity is an embedded part of the inspection process. There is an aligned vision between Ministry of Justice, HMPPS, and the HM Inspectorate of probation in terms of understanding the value of the voice of lived experience and the benefits that co-production could bring. This is a golden opportunity moment.

MM: Can you describe how you will get by-in from your partners, stakeholders, the leadership team, and the community into the concept of engagement and co-production?

It is important that we can demonstrate what happens to the feedback that we gather and what happens to the data. We must be really clear that we are not just collecting data or recording statistical information to feed into our reports, and then nothing happens to it, or it does not have any impact.

An important part of my work moving forward will be to focus on how we provide feedback, what happens to the information gathered not only in our reports but what happens next. We are planning to do a piece of work around this that will provide feedback to participants about the reports they contributed to, the results of the inspection, and details about any action plans following on from the inspection.

MM: You have a lot of partners, who may have different priorities, and standpoints in relation to the co-production and engagement agenda. How do you manage conflict if they occur?

We are a statutory organisation, and we inspect against published standards. To maintain a consistent approach to inspection it is important that we are transparent in our process and reporting. Therefore, good communication and negotiation are vital. We are always clear about our methodology and expectations and work hard to ensure that this information is accessible.

We endeavour to ensure that our lived experience partners can translate the standards questions to be engaging and reflective of the experiences of people on probation. We do this through consultation, communicating, reviewing, and constantly evaluating. We check our questions for accessibility and relevance through the LEEN and other Lived Experience panels, as well as consulting about matters such as the language used on the website. We are also able to utilise the expertise of our commissioned service providers and the vast history and experience they bring to the matter of co-production. We are an open and flexible organisation who are always keen to listen to other perspectives, points of view, and the wider conversation.

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MM: With the new directive issued about language by HMPPS, how will this impact on the engagement and co-production agenda?

It will undoubtedly be a challenge. When I first started this role, we called people service users. To align ourselves with the language that was being used by HMPPS, we adapted our language to use the term people on probation and people in prison. With this recent change of language, sadly it feels like a step backwards because language and our use of language is so important in the work that we do. I personally feel strongly that labels such as 'offender' can have a negative impact on a person's internal identity and lead to creating barriers for people to make personal change.

MM: What outcomes can people expect as the HM Inspectorate of Probation Service User Engagement Strategy 2019 — 2022 ends this year?

We will be working on a new service user engagement strategy for 2023 — 2026. We also plan to review our commissioned providers after the first year of the contract, this will provide us with the opportunity to review our approach, adapt, and improve where necessary. All our inspection reports are published on the HM Inspectorate of Probation website

MM: What advice would you give to individuals who are considering applying an engagement and co-production approach to improve service delivery?

I was thinking about this question this morning. A specific phrase comes to my mind when I think about co-production, which is 'nothing about us without us.' This is a very powerful phrase.



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