



**THE  
USER  
VOICE  
OF THE  
CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE SYSTEM**

The criminal justice system is in crisis.  
In the UK, 75 per cent of young offenders  
re-offend within two years of release from custody.

**Offenders and ex-offenders say why.**

## **REPORT AND KEY FINDINGS OF A SEMINAR FOR SERVING AND EX-OFFENDERS DESIGNED TO GIVE USERS OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM A VOICE IN PRISON SERVICES**

In April 2008, a seminar was organised to listen to the voice of current and former offenders.

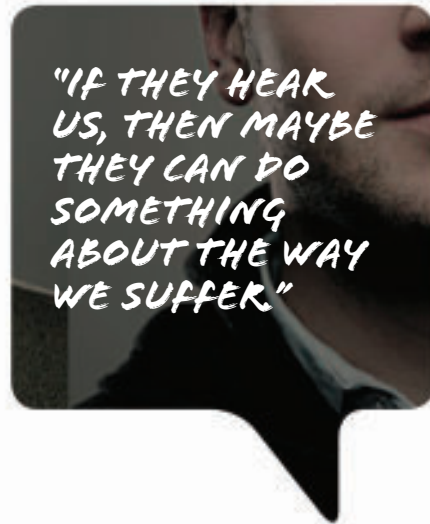
The event was a unique approach to criminal justice evaluation; debate was restricted to users of the criminal justice system. All 35 delegates were serving or ex-offenders, clocking up 200 years of incarceration between them.

The seminar was co-organised and funded by The Aldridge Foundation and was the brainchild of ex-offender and policy adviser Mark Johnson. The event was run and organised entirely by offenders themselves, including the design of the questions: neither the funder nor administrators, although present, took part in the discussions which helped increase levels of confidence and openness within the groups.

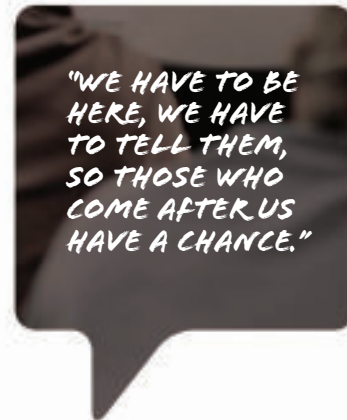
Predominately delegates were people who have already made a decision to change their lives and against the odds succeeded in doing so. Many have gained degrees or professional qualifications, most now work in jobs which help others and a few have gone on to gain national recognition for their work.

But the seminar also included delegates currently on the methadone programme (controlled heroin withdrawal), tagged offenders and a serving offender (Released on Temporary Licence). Crimes committed varied from gang, violent and drug-related crimes to armed robbery and crimes which carry life sentences.

Empowering prisoners has been regarded as morally questionable and politically dangerous. But Rod Aldridge and Mark Johnson believe that, when given a chance to speak, the voice of the user of the criminal justice system can add insight, value and answers to many of the system's current problems and failings.



**"IF THEY HEAR US, THEN MAYBE THEY CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY WE SUFFER."**



**"WE HAVE TO BE HERE, WE HAVE TO TELL THEM, SO THOSE WHO COME AFTER US HAVE A CHANCE."**

# A CHANGE IN APPROACH – THE USER VOICE

Listening to users to improve public services is not a new concept; in fact, it is commonplace. Yet marginalised groups are almost entirely missing from user engagement strategies; this is particularly true of offenders and ex-offenders.

## WHY SHOULD WE LISTEN?

This previously untapped voice exposes the reality of the situation in the criminal justice system and represents the only group that, **from their own life experiences**, can:

- ✓ analyse the causes of crime;
- ✓ identify the turning points where lives can change;
- ✓ suggest ways to add value to our failing prison system; and,
- ✓ provide ideas for successful resettlement.

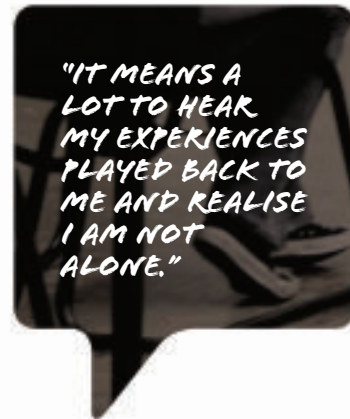
Not only do offenders, who have been rehabilitated and integrated back into society, have the right to be heard, but society benefits when these experiences are discussed and lessons learned from them. This group represents the most qualified to evaluate current policies and programmes. We all gain when criminal justice programmes actually provide justice and rehabilitation.

Consider the impact on the following:

- ✓ Average annual cost per prisoner place – £37,500<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Cost of a single new prison place – £152,000<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ Cost of NOMS – £4.464bn<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Annual cost of re-offending – £11bn<sup>4</sup>

Serving offenders have the right to be heard too and the criminal justice system will see drastic improvements from their observations on the successes or failures of our prisons. However, this group is usually hard to reach because they may be habitually secretive, they might have unchecked illness causing paranoia and sociability problems and previous experiences with councils or the government may have been discouraging or intimidating.

The seminar was designed to begin the process of bridging this gap.

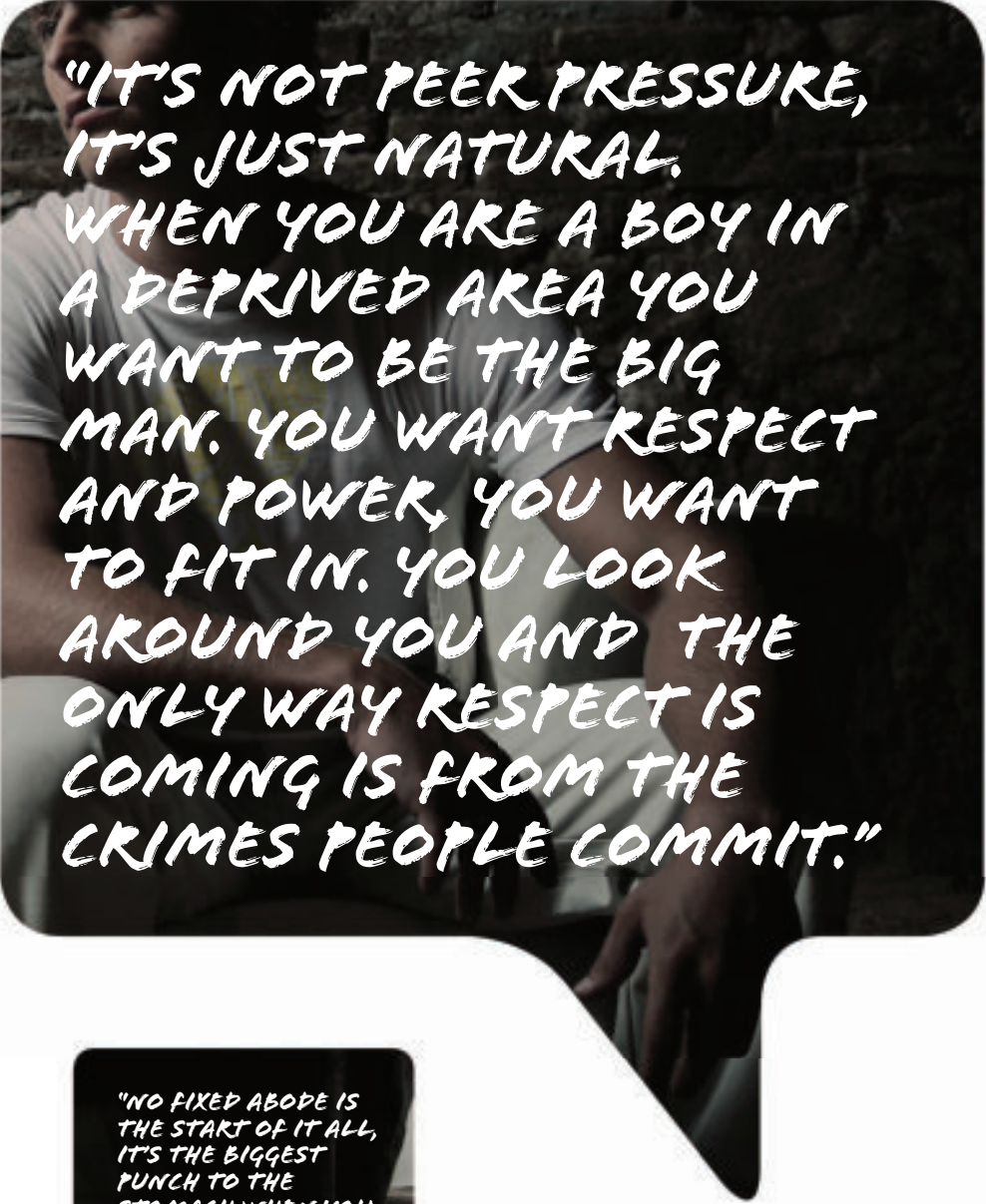


1. Lord Carter's Review of Prisons, December 2007

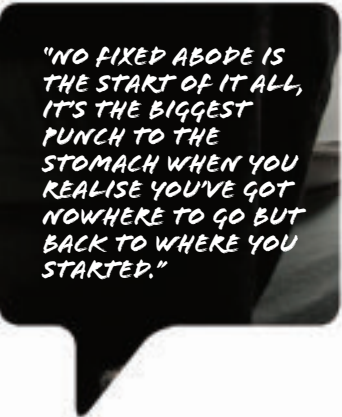
2. Hansard, House of Commons written answers, 15 January 2008

3. NOMS, NOMS costs: briefing for staff and stakeholders, December 2007

4. Social Exclusion Unit, 'Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners', July 2002



"IT'S NOT PEER PRESSURE,  
IT'S JUST NATURAL.  
WHEN YOU ARE A BOY IN  
A DEPRIVED AREA YOU  
WANT TO BE THE BIG  
MAN. YOU WANT RESPECT  
AND POWER, YOU WANT  
TO FIT IN. YOU LOOK  
AROUND YOU AND THE  
ONLY WAY RESPECT IS  
COMING IS FROM THE  
CRIMES PEOPLE COMMIT."



"NO FIXED ABODE IS  
THE START OF IT ALL,  
IT'S THE BIGGEST  
PUNCH TO THE  
STOMACH WHEN YOU  
REALISE YOU'VE GOT  
NOWHERE TO GO BUT  
BACK TO WHERE YOU  
STARTED."

## A CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN CRISIS?

- ✓ Our jails are currently filled to capacity with record numbers of inmates: there are over 82,000 in England and Wales alone.
- ✓ Our rate of imprisonment is the highest in Western Europe.
- ✓ Within two years of release, 65 per cent re-offend and among young offenders this rises to 75 per cent.<sup>5</sup>
- ✓ 125,000 children have a parent in custody, and 65 per cent of children with parents in prison go on to offend.<sup>6</sup> There is no bigger indicator of the size of the future prison population.

5. Ministry of Justice, 'Re-offending of adults: results from the 2004 cohort', March 2007

6. Cabinet Office, 'Reaching Out: Progress on Social Exclusion', February 2007

Characteristic	General population	Prison population
Ran away from home as a child	11%	47% of male and 50% of female sentenced prisoners
Taken into care as a child	2%	27%
Regularly truanted from school	3%	30%
Excluded from school	2%	49% of male and 33% of female sentenced prisoners
No qualifications	15%	52% of men and 71% of women
Numeracy at or below Level 1 (level expected 11 year-olds)	23%	65%
Reading ability at or below Level 1 (level expected 11 year-olds)	21-23%	48%
Unemployed before imprisonment	5%	67%
Homeless	0.9%	32%
Suffer from two or more mental disorders	5% men and 2% women	72% of male and 70% of female sentenced prisoners
Psychotic disorder	0.5% men and 0.6% women	7% of male and 14% of female sentenced prisoners
Drug use in previous year	13% men and 8% women	66% of male and 55% of female sentenced prisoners
Hazardous drinking	38% men and 15% women	63% of male and 39% of female sentenced prisoners

Source: Social Exclusion Unit, 'Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners', July 2002

# KEY FINDINGS

Delegates were asked to base group discussions around the main issues which affect offenders and society. These were:

1. The causes of crime
2. Experiences of the criminal justice system
3. Agents of successful resettlement

Summary of what was said:

**1** Crime is most likely a **secondary factor** of other circumstances or pre-disposing conditions, which need to be **addressed** in a **therapeutic environment** from the beginning of the custodial sentence.

**2** Prison programmes should be subjected to **service user evaluations**, to enable the delivery of more effective and therefore more cost efficient services, and to give offenders a voice in their own rehabilitation and resettlement.

**3** **Mentoring schemes** and **peer-to-peer support** should be much more widely available; these were often described as a key factor in the process of change.

4

Support services for prisoners need to be **joined-up** to enable them to access more easily the current provision which is so fragmented that offenders often fall through its cracks.

A **one-stop-shop** was suggested where housing, employment, drug and alcohol treatment, counselling, education and training signposting could be delivered.

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More prison staff are needed, but with the **right training** existing staff could be better utilised. Appropriate training would give the **right screening tools** so that staff can identify each individual's needs, from drug treatment to employment.

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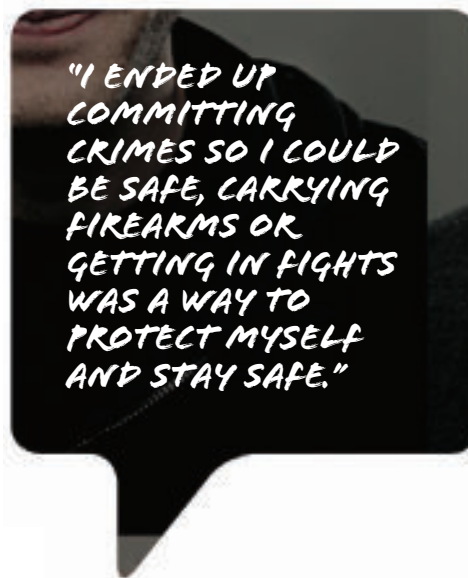
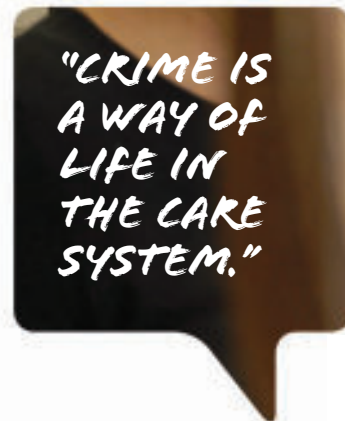
The **user voice** should become a **natural point of reference** at all parts on the journey to rehabilitation through the criminal justice system; from prison councils in prison, to consultation exercises and forums post-release.

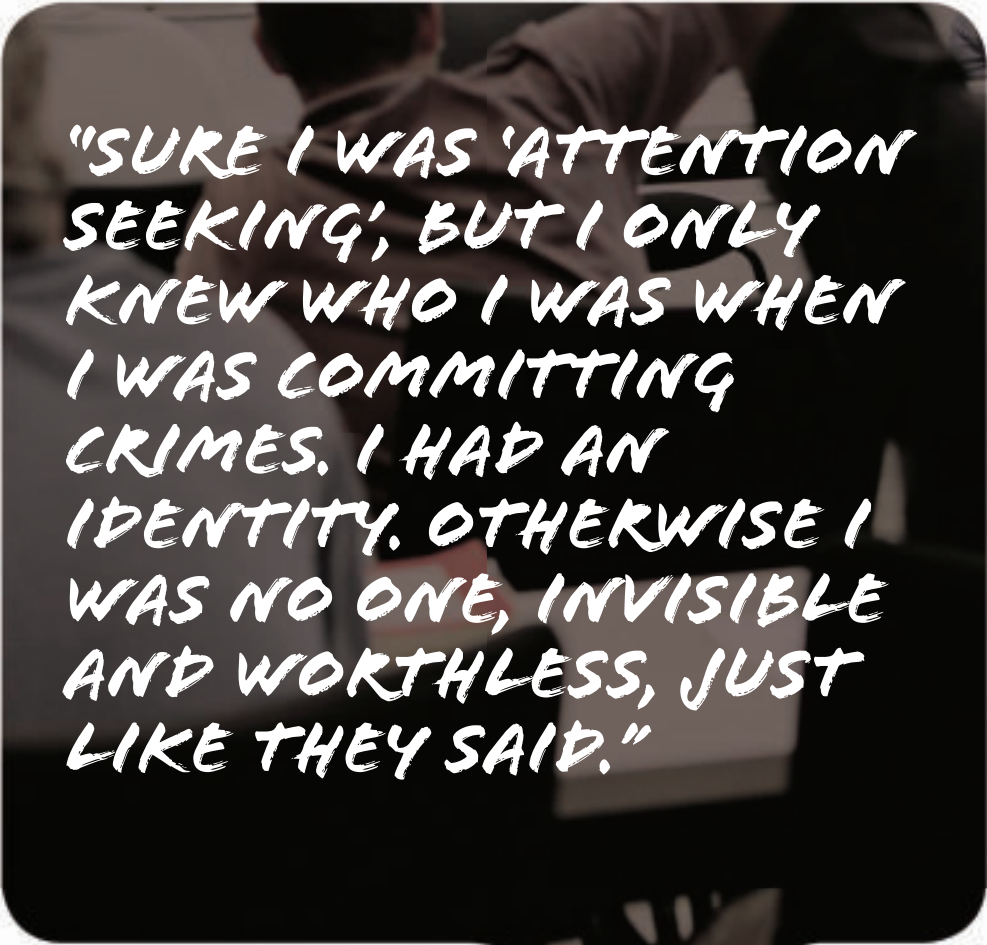
## WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF CRIME?

- ✓ Crime is often a secondary factor of other circumstances or pre-disposing conditions. Most commonly cited were:
  - Violence, abuse or neglect in childhood;
  - Mental health problems;
  - Poverty and consequent desperation;
  - Drug use in the childhood home; and,
  - Special educational needs.

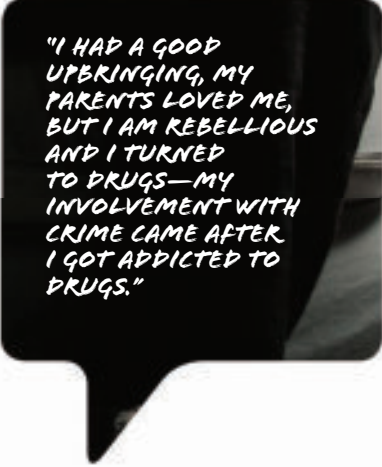
However, a small percentage of the group identified themselves as career criminals who felt there were no pre-disposing factors in their crimes.

- ✓ Many offenders disengaged early from school due to exclusion, self-exclusion or under-achievement.
- ✓ For younger offenders, crime is often a result of having nothing else to do, plus a lack of money or prospects.
- ✓ One of the biggest pre-disposing factors is drug use which is closely related to other factors listed above.





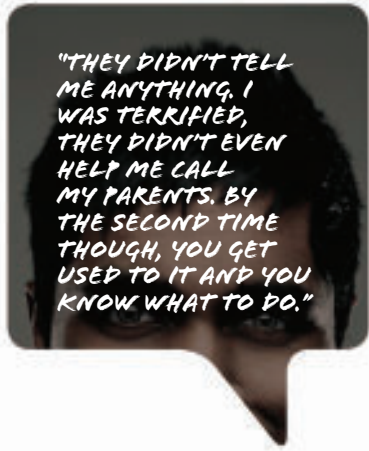
"SURE I WAS 'ATTENTION SEEKING', BUT I ONLY KNEW WHO I WAS WHEN I WAS COMMITTING CRIMES. I HAD AN IDENTITY. OTHERWISE I WAS NO ONE, INVISIBLE AND WORTHLESS, JUST LIKE THEY SAID."



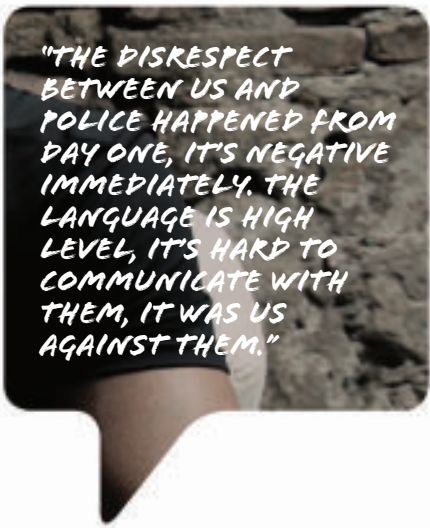
"I HAD A GOOD UPBRINGING, MY PARENTS LOVED ME, BUT I AM REBELLIOUS AND I TURNED TO DRUGS—MY INVOLVEMENT WITH CRIME CAME AFTER I GOT ADDICTED TO DRUGS."

## WHAT ARE YOUR EXPERIENCES OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM?

- ✓ A sound prison system can at the very least offer an offender **respite** from an often chaotic lifestyle before he/she faces the need to change.
- ✓ Prison should be used to **address the reason** offenders are there in the first place. The criminal justice system should not be resistant to change.
- ✓ Prison frequently **reinforces and compounds the negative experiences** which led to the original offence, for example violence or drug use.
- ✓ There is a need for the law to deprive offenders of their liberty in order to **punish** them for their crime. **But the current system unnecessarily deprives prisoners of their human rights.** Including the loss of:
  - control (prisoners can be moved to different jails without notice whether visitors are expected or not)
  - choice
  - dignity
  - nutritional preferences
  - control over personal relationships
  - self-protection against violent inmates and aggressive prison staff
- ✓ There is a gap between prisons as places of punishment and prisons as places of **rehabilitation**. Sentencing and incarceration constitute punishment. **A lifetime of labelling and stigma is discrimination.** Through therapy, offenders can **break the cycle of recidivism** by addressing the pre-disposing factors which have led them to crime. Opportunities for therapeutic work in prison are severely limited, however, and if programmes are available at all, accessing them is extremely difficult.
- ✓ With the **right training**, prison staff could provide assistance and direction to prisoners and ex-offenders. Current programmes are ineffective and



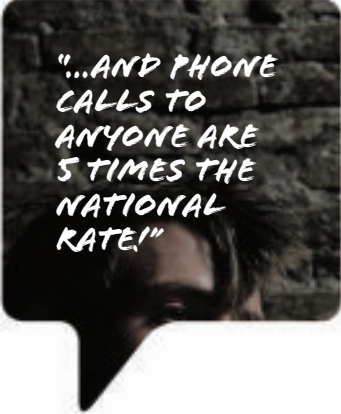
"THEY DIDN'T TELL ME ANYTHING. I WAS TERRIFIED, THEY DIDN'T EVEN HELP ME CALL MY PARENTS. BY THE SECOND TIME THOUGH, YOU GET USED TO IT AND YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO."



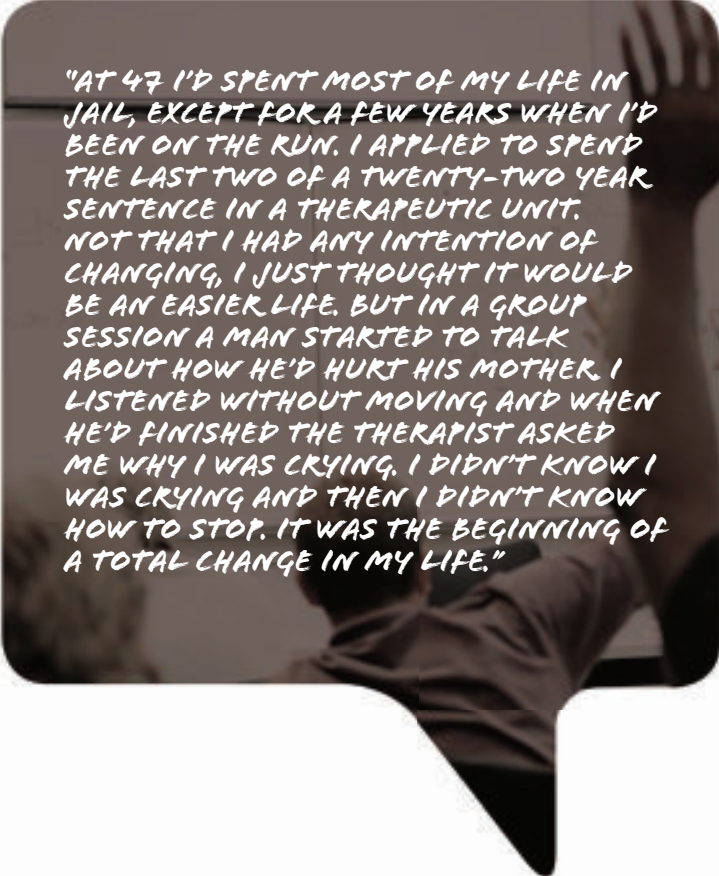
"THE DISRESPECT BETWEEN US AND POLICE HAPPENED FROM DAY ONE, IT'S NEGATIVE IMMEDIATELY. THE LANGUAGE IS HIGH LEVEL, IT'S HARD TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM, IT WAS US AGAINST THEM."

expensive. Programme evaluations conducted by ex-offenders who have been through the prison service will provide new design blueprints for programmes which can truly help people change their lives.

- ✓ Mental illness is common in prison (the Government's 2007 Equalities Review found that 71 per cent of convicted adults have two or more mental health problems). These problems frequently go **undiagnosed** and **untreated**. It is common for unmanageable prisoners to be sedated. They are rarely referred to mental health institutions.
- ✓ The problem of the **disproportionate role of drugs** in crime and the widespread use of drugs in jail was fully acknowledged but not addressed in detail by the group. They saw it as a large topic deserving further discussion.



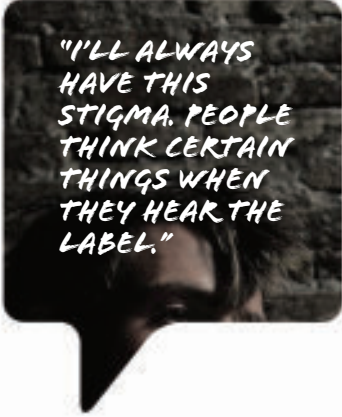
"...AND PHONE CALLS TO ANYONE ARE 5 TIMES THE NATIONAL RATE!"



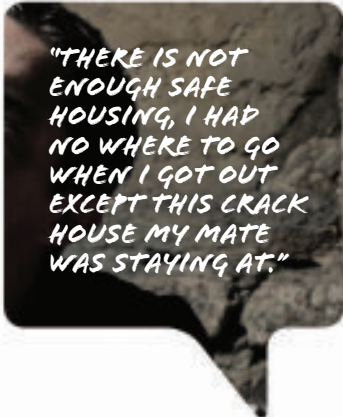
"AT 47 I'D SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE IN JAIL, EXCEPT FOR A FEW YEARS WHEN I'D BEEN ON THE RUN. I APPLIED TO SPEND THE LAST TWO OF A TWENTY-TWO YEAR SENTENCE IN A THERAPEUTIC UNIT. NOT THAT I HAD ANY INTENTION OF CHANGING, I JUST THOUGHT IT WOULD BE AN EASIER LIFE. BUT IN A GROUP SESSION A MAN STARTED TO TALK ABOUT HOW HE'D HURT HIS MOTHER. I LISTENED WITHOUT MOVING AND WHEN HE'D FINISHED THE THERAPIST ASKED ME WHY I WAS CRYING. I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS CRYING AND THEN I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO STOP. IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF A TOTAL CHANGE IN MY LIFE."

## WHAT ARE THE KEY AGENTS OF SUCCESSFUL RESETTLEMENT?

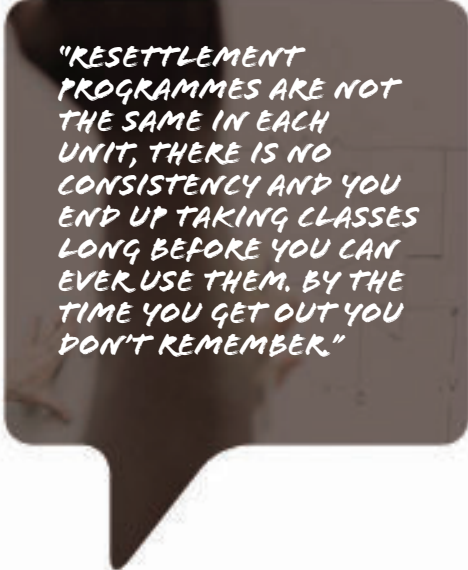
- ✓ Emotional and mental stability is necessary before any more practical initiatives like housing and work-based training can be successful. So **rehabilitation should start from sentencing** and not be condensed into a two-week course at the end of a prison term.
- ✓ Preparation for life outside should **address practicalities** like how to shop and pay bills. Many prisoners may never have lived with these everyday responsibilities before.
- ✓ There should be a holistic approach combining **both therapeutic intervention and the support of a key worker** or personal officer from sentencing to beyond the prison gate.
- ✓ **Peer role models**, people who have been through prison and have changed, can **act as beacons** for offenders who follow them. Mentoring schemes and peer-to-peer support should be much more widely available.
- ✓ Relocation is an essential part of successful resettlement. Many prisoners leave with **nowhere to go but back to the people and environment where they committed their crime.**
- ✓ On leaving prison, ex-offenders are particularly vulnerable and should have access to a network of emotional and practical support which



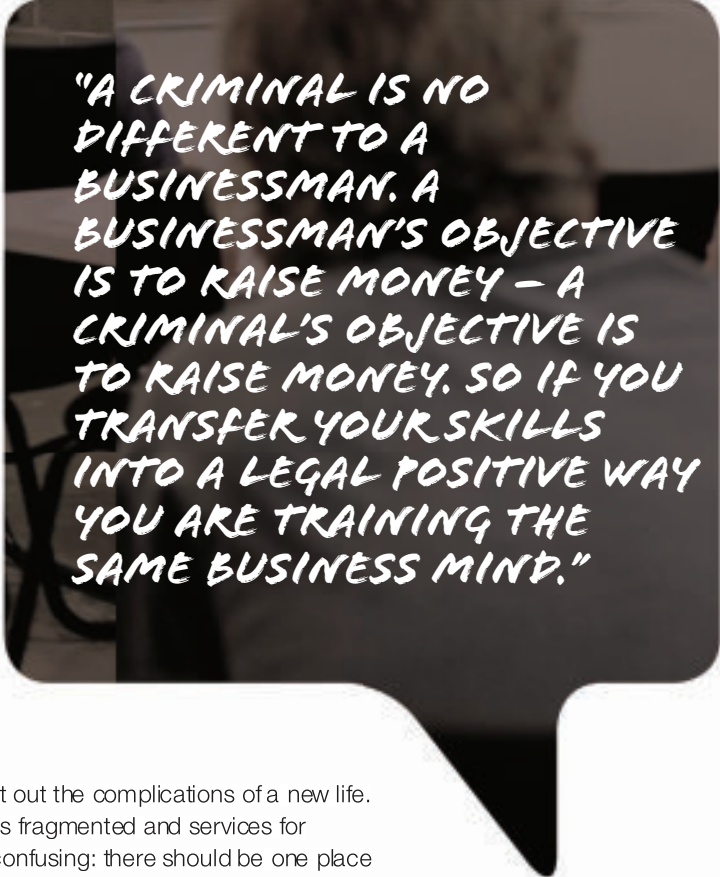
"I'LL ALWAYS HAVE THIS STIGMA. PEOPLE THINK CERTAIN THINGS WHEN THEY HEAR THE LABEL."



"THERE IS NOT ENOUGH SAFE HOUSING, I HAD NO WHERE TO GO WHEN I GOT OUT EXCEPT THIS CRACK HOUSE MY MATE WAS STAYING AT."




"RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMMES ARE NOT THE SAME IN EACH UNIT, THERE IS NO CONSISTENCY AND YOU END UP TAKING CLASSES LONG BEFORE YOU CAN EVER USE THEM. BY THE TIME YOU GET OUT YOU DON'T REMEMBER."



"A CRIMINAL IS NO DIFFERENT TO A BUSINESSMAN. A BUSINESSMAN'S OBJECTIVE IS TO RAISE MONEY – A CRIMINAL'S OBJECTIVE IS TO RAISE MONEY. SO IF YOU TRANSFER YOUR SKILLS INTO A LEGAL POSITIVE WAY YOU ARE TRAINING THE SAME BUSINESS MIND."

can help them sort out the complications of a new life. Current provision is fragmented and services for prisoner support confusing: there should be one place which can provide this.

- ✓ Talent goes unrecognised in prison and it is therefore not developed for application in the outside world. For instance, a drug dealer might have the potential to become a businessman or entrepreneur if he or she has the right support programmes and the willingness to change.
- ✓ Support staff need the right screening tools so that they can identify each individual's needs, from drug treatment to employment.
- ✓ Prisoners have served their time, but those who are ready to change seldom find that the public are ready to let them. Employers are reluctant to become involved with ex-offenders and that includes public sector and charitable organisations, some of which promote the cause of ex-offenders without actually employing any.
- ✓ The journey to successful resettlement is treatment, accommodation and work. These are key factors.



"ALL THESE CERTIFICATES I HAVE DON'T MATTER. THEY SEE OFFENDER ON MY APPLICATION AND THAT'S IT."

## CAPTURING THE USER VOICE

### WHO?

Rod Aldridge and Mark Johnson combine exceptional entrepreneurial talent with special experience.



Rod Aldridge was an educational under-achiever who went on to be founder and chairman of the Capita Group plc, which became a FTSE 100 company under his leadership. He set up The Aldridge Foundation to help young people from all backgrounds discover their talents and find the self-esteem to develop them. He is the sponsor of two city academies, one in Darwen, Lancashire and the other in Falmer, Brighton.



Mark Johnson was a homeless drug addict and serial offender who, after rehabilitation, set up his own successful tree surgery business. He wrote a best-selling book about his life, *Wasted*, and is now a special adviser to The Prince's Trust, pioneering the Working One to One with Young Offenders project. He is also adviser to the National Probation Service and is a consultant for policy-makers at all levels on crime and drug abuse issues.

### INCLUDING ALL CITIZENS' VOICES

The term “user voice” refers to people who use services voicing their opinion about those services, in this case the criminal justice system. The Communities and Local Government Empowerment Action Plan (June 2005) describes “the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them”. Communities can mean service user groups and such groups have been conspicuous and successful in, for instance, the National Health Service. However, users of the criminal justice system have generally been excluded from the move towards empowerment, although their views can benefit society as a whole, and are as important to the design and delivery of their service as patients' views are to the National Health Service.

The user group who took part in this seminar also designed and shaped it. Delegates were able to speak openly in neutral territory to a small peer group without feeling judged. Many had never been asked for their views before and were helped by facilitators to focus on key issues to make optimal use of the available time.

### HOW?

The user voice seminar was held at a venue in Birmingham on 18 and 19 April 2008. There were 35 delegates, of whom 29 were male. The average age was 33 and ages ranged from 17 to 53. All regions of England were represented, with London, the South East and the South

West making up 63 per cent, as were Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The group was racially diverse. The organisers aimed for a safe space where everyone had the same experience; this universality enabled people to speak freely about their knowledge and their opinions.

The delegates were all selected via Mark Johnson's network of contacts for their ability to articulate and participate in such an event. They received questions on the three topics (causes of crime, experiences of the criminal justice system and agents of successful resettlement) in advance and most met in smaller, pre-seminar workshops to discuss these questions. Written submissions from serving offenders were also encouraged. Working through the questions in advance increased the comfort participants had with the questions and the subject matter which made their service suggestions more relevant.

The scene was set by a discussion of the 'Psychology of Offending', delivered by Lorraine Parry of the Quinton House Project, which gave delegates an understanding of their behaviour and broke down barriers between them, enabling frank discussion in the following conversations.

At the seminar delegates were organised into three sets, each of which discussed the three topics independently. Each set was facilitated by an ex-offender who was a qualified therapist. Questions were framed by people with the same experience. Sets were small enough to give everyone the opportunity to make meaningful contributions. Later all 35 delegates came together for each set to present its findings; Eric Allison (ex-offender and Prisons Correspondent for The Guardian) and Enver Solomon (Deputy Director, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, King's College London, the only non-offender) summed up.

Delegates were treated as experts in their subject. The Aldridge Foundation paid for their time, and expenses were reimbursed.

### *A CONTINUING DIALOGUE*

This report has been sent to users of the criminal justice system, service providers, policy-makers and journalists, so that they hear the user voice.

The event and this document are intended only to be the first step in what needs to be a constant dialogue with those with experience of the criminal justice system.

We need to continue listening to the only group of people who know from experience what will make a difference, and to act on the evidence they offer.

# **THE USER VOICE OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

is available to all at [www.aldridgefoundation.com](http://www.aldridgefoundation.com)  
and [www.mark-johnson.org.uk](http://www.mark-johnson.org.uk)

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