



VALUING VOLUNTEERS IN PRISON

The views of service users and ex-offenders

Acknowledgements

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Written by UserVoice
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1. INTRODUCTION

User Voice undertook a peer-led consultation to explore perceptions of volunteering in prison from the perspective of service users in the Criminal Justice System. This involved five focus groups across England, engaging a total of 33 current service users and six ex-service users. Focus groups were held with prisoners from two prisons in the South East (Prison), service users reporting to two Community Rehabilitation Companies in the North East and North West (Community) and with ex-service users in the South East, who have attempted both successfully and unsuccessfully to volunteer within prison (Ex-service user).

Both prison focus groups were held in male prisons, one category C training prison and one category B local prison. These groups engaged a total of 20 participants combined. Of those currently on probation, ten were male and three were female. The ex-service user focus group consisted of three male and three female participants.

**“YOU WILL HAVE
PEOPLE THAT HAVE
COMPASSION, THAT
WILL WANT TO COME
AND ASSIST AND
THAT WILL
TRANSFORM THE
WHOLE SYSTEM
QUITE A LOT.**

(Prison)

2. FINDINGS

The following section is separated into three key themes:

- **experience of volunteers and volunteering**
- **characteristics of volunteers**
- **delivering voluntary services in prison.**

2.1 EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEERING



**VOLUNTEERS
WILL BE MORE
MOTIVATED TO
HELP YOU.**

(Prison)

1. There are instances of focus group participants using phrases that conflate volunteers and staff.

However, the focus group introductions were clear on the subject of volunteering. Therefore, in these instances, participants should be understood to be referring to external volunteers.

2.1.1 Service provision

Experiences of services provided by external volunteers in prison varied dramatically across the focus groups. In one prison, few participants had worked with volunteers as they believed there were few or no opportunities to do so. Indeed, one ex-service user stated that voluntarily delivered services were not well publicised within prison and consequently she was unaware of any services in the prison delivered by external ex-service user, or non-service user, volunteers.

“Well I don’t see none. I haven’t been in a prison since October [2015], up until then I hadn’t heard of any other volunteers going into prison, and all the time I was there they certainly didn’t come in. So I don’t think it’s getting any better.” (Ex-service user)

Participants were mixed in their opinions of whether there were sufficient voluntarily delivered services offered throughout their time in prison. Some stated that volunteers have been underutilised within certain establishments.

“I would say that there isn’t enough volunteers period, the system doesn’t allow for it.” (Ex-service user)

Employ more voluntary staff¹ to help in prisons and to expand the areas they can help in.” (Prison)

However, other participants had a more positive experience of the number of volunteers in prison, especially those within the second prison focus group, who had seen an increase in the amount of services delivered by external volunteers available in recent months.

“There has been an increase in prison volunteers such as Shannon Trust coming in and the volunteer job fair.” (Prison)

These discrepancies were highlighted by one of the ex-service users who commented that it made attempting to volunteer in prisons as an ex-service user an unjust experience, which filters down to the service users within the establishments.

“I think that’s the main thing they could improve on for voluntary service in prisons is that risk assessment and have it consistent across different categories of prisons, instead of being on the governor’s whim, because prisoners are then being disadvantaged [by] not getting the services that someone else in a similar category prison might be getting. I don’t think that’s fair.” (Ex-service user)

Opinions were less divided amongst those who had accessed volunteers. A large majority of these participants were very positive about the impact ex-service user volunteers were able to provide within prison.

“I found the volunteers easy to work with and I found their experiences in past life helped them get involved with us more than the officers which is a positive. I have not experienced any negatives from volunteers.” (Prison)

“I am taught by the Shannon Trust team to teach learners how to read. I have had a positive experience working with the outside agency, it’s beneficial for me to progress through the prison system.” (Prison)

“Everything’s turned right the way round. They opened the doors, it was a really good feeling and more of it should be happening.” (Ex-service user)

These positive experiences were consistent across different types of support, including the provision of skills, practical assistance and cognitive programmes.

“I’ve used [a mentoring service] before, where they’ve come in to help support me. They’ve been a great help, they’ve given me confidence to speak up for myself and also they’re there to be impartial most importantly.” (Community)

“[Volunteers can ensure] you’ve got some stability for when you get out...they act on your behalf when you’re in prison.” (Community)

“Something I got involved with heavily in prison, very good for people going through the system to help them think. The consequence of thinking, how we think, how we view ourself and aim to be a prosocial person when we come out of that prison system.” (Community)

For many, the motivation to engage in positive activity was the most constructive aspect of their involvement with volunteers. The independence of volunteers, freely and actively trying to help service users, was mentioned frequently as a powerful tool to inspire motivation.

“They’re coming in because of you; it gives you a sense of value so you value yourself. They give up their time to come and see you. You admire what they do, and you in turn want to do something. So it’s like everybody is working off each other.” (Prison)

“It was sitting in prison after spending many years coming in and out of prison and thinking ‘there is no way out of this’. Then to hear the meeting was going on, I think that is what put a bit of hope in myself that there might be a way out of this.” (Ex-service user)

“They challenged you, they motivated you, you went there for support.” (Community)

“It gives that person the extra boost...as soon as that person comes in, they haven’t got time to sit down and that withdrawal symptom and that relapsation [sic] back into criminality [doesn’t have time to develop].” (Prison)

“You will have people that have compassion, that will want to come and assist and that will transform the whole system quite a lot.” (Prison)

“EMPLOY MORE VOLUNTARY STAFF TO HELP IN PRISONS AND TO EXPAND THE AREAS THEY CAN HELP IN.”

(Prison)

For some, the motivation to engage in positive activity that was evoked by volunteers continued beyond their custodial sentence and has affected their decision making on release. A continuity of positive action either side of release was important for one individual:

“*They motivated me to carry on volunteering when I got out of prison.*”
(Community)

“When you get out and still see the [volunteers] and how good they’ve moved on in their life, when you go into other services as well.”
(Community)

It is worth noting that while most individuals had personally experienced positive interactions with volunteers, there were accounts of volunteers not receiving the necessary level of training to satisfactorily deliver the service needed.

“*Personally, it’s always been positive. But I have seen negative experiences with other external services where volunteers haven’t been trained properly around boundaries, confidentiality and I have seen them being broken in some other services.*” (Ex-service user)

“Volunteers need more training.” (Community)

Further, in one case, whilst volunteers had provided a valuable service, there was a lack of continuity in the delivery of the service and no explanation had been given.

“*A couple volunteers come in to speak to us, it was dead inspiring to carry it through and I did that for six to nine months and it went dead quick because all of the time spent out the cell. The bad thing about it was they stopped the guys coming in, I don’t know the reason. It was good but for me moving on I realised what’s going to be left for the guys after me. Was probably the best time of my life as an inmate and doing all this learning because it was something I’d never taken on board before, the last thing on my mind.*” (Community)

“**FREEDOM TO MAKE
THEIR OWN CHOICES
RATHER THAN BEING
TOLD WHAT TO DO BY
THE PRISON AND
PRISON STAFF.**

(Community)



2.1.2 Benefits of non-prison staff

Service users within prison and the community identified a number of areas where it is advantageous to have volunteers deliver services in the place of prison staff. Most frequent was volunteers' independence from the prison. There was a suggestion that, symbolically, volunteers represent those who want to help rehabilitate prisoners, whilst prison officers were perceived as representing the more punitive side of a custodial environment. This encourages service users to engage with services involving volunteers, when they may be less willing to engage if those same services were delivered by prison staff.

“ *You've got a set of people who are naturally rebellious against establishment. They look at you to say 'you're getting paid to come in and sort this out for me' they don't know what I'm going through, you cannot relate to what I'm going through, you haven't got experience. Cos prisoners look at officers as people who come with keys, open door, close door, answer bell when they can be bothered to answer the bells.”* (Prison)

“I think volunteers are organisations that are not authoritative, they're more approachable, they are more on your wave length, they are more understanding and listening. For me, I was able to approach them more, they were more caring for me and not in an authoritative position.” (Community)

Volunteers can also help reconcile the tension between those in authority and those subject to authority. Individuals, including volunteers, who do not represent either of these categories were considered important to the dynamic of the prison.

“ *Identifying with someone who is not an authoritative figure, that's where it can be really beneficial to have volunteers going into prisons. It breaks down barriers with the authoritative figures in prisons to have people coming in from external services and getting involved in prisons.”* (Community)

“It's an independent voice to listen to; you've got all that control and compliance in prisons and it's a security and risk. There's little humanity, and I think volunteers coming in provides that humanity to prisoners.” (Ex-service user)

Participants stated that it was important and beneficial for service users to be able to experience dynamics that did not involve authority.

“ *Freedom to make their own choices rather than being told what to do by the prison and prison staff.”* (Community)

“Here, when you've got 600 foreign national prisoners, you don't see no ethnic officers. But when a volunteer comes in even a [prisoner] who chooses to be rebellious after a little time, they are gonna say 'you know what, this [volunteer] has given his free time, he is not like these lot, he does wanna make a change'. Psychology has a part to play.” (Prison)

“These people are essential, you have someone to relate to for not being paid but still being dedicated to making change.” (Prison)

“ IDENTIFYING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS NOT AN AUTHORITATIVE FIGURE, THAT'S WHERE IT CAN BE REALLY BENEFICIAL TO HAVE VOLUNTEERS GOING INTO PRISONS.

(Community)

There was an agreement that the staff's position of authority does not allow for trust to build between them and service users. Volunteers are able to overcome this due to their perceived impartiality and independence.

“ Sometimes just to have someone who is unbiased to talk to. Prison staff are often too busy and are not always trusted by prisoners.”
(Community)

Volunteers were universally recognised as supportive. Every service user spoke positively about the reliability and willingness of prison volunteers in comparison to prison staff.

“ Most of the time it's about which officers are offering the service to prisoners [that determines] the choice to take part or not but when it comes to a voluntary service prisoners are more open to that regardless of the volunteer.” (Prison)

“Because the prison service [is] not reliable. Volunteers give 100% dedication.” (Prison)

“The volunteers are more likely to help you than the prison service.”
(Prison)

“They are easier to get hold of.” (Community)

One reason why volunteers were viewed positively in comparison to staff was their focus on support and help. There was recognition amongst service users that staff were unable to bring the same attention to the provision of similar services.

“ Keep in mind, when someone is volunteering, they are doing it out of passion, they are doing it out of a level of sympathy. At the end of the day, if someone is volunteering it is because they want to make a change. Rather than someone who looks at it as a burden, who says, I have to go to work, that's my job. Whether I'm in a mood swing, whether I had a bad day at home, for them to keep professional, if you go to the same building to work for 20 years for them to bring their personal issues into the work place, into that environment, is very easy.” (Prison)

A final benefit of volunteers was their ability to connect with services outside of the prison, meaning that they have access to a wider range of current and up to date information.

“ Outside volunteers give awareness of what's going on out there, they bring something fresh, something different.” (Prison)

“Knowledge, if you're unaware of anything, a volunteer can be a great source of information.” (Community)

2.1.3 Expansion of services delivered by volunteers

Participants were asked where they felt volunteers could be better utilised within prisons. Their answers highlight areas that are either unsupported due to a lack of staff / resource or needed due to the perceived nature of prison staff. For example, in the case of the latter, participants stated a need for programmes and interventions focused on reducing re-offending to be delivered by ex-service users rather than prison staff who they feel would not have the same life experiences.

**“ KNOWLEDGE,
IF YOU'RE UNAWARE
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INFORMATION.”**

(Community)

“The area of volunteering that I think would be more useful to offenders is the area of how to reduce reoffending from offenders. It would be helpful, volunteers that are well experienced, somebody with past [offending] experience.” (Prison)

“Promoting good character and enhancing good behaviour within from offenders so that they will not reoffend again. That area will be very vital for the prison and the volunteer can do a lot, people of experience, experience of what we are experiencing now that will make us understand there is no importance of doing this, these are the things you need to do as a man, these are the things that will get your life forward.” (Prison)

Likewise, suggestions were made that ex-service user volunteers should provide mentoring services, due to the fact that in this case volunteers will have a shared experience with service users.

“Advising them that when you go out these are things you should be able to do. These are the things that are expected of you.” (Prison)

“Mentoring, especially in the area of resettlement, cos in most prisons resettlement is non-existent. But everyone knows here, when you are outside, you haven’t got structure, majority of the prisoners are lacking family structures outside and institutions that willing to take that extra mile.” (Prison)

“Someone who can help them develop, signpost them to providers, services and provide a support mechanism.” (Community)

Within both prison focus groups there were references to a lack of specialist knowledge amongst prison staff, but this was particularly the case surrounding issues affecting foreign national prisoners. It was suggested that volunteers could adequately fill this gap and support service users by providing expert guidance.

“What I would like is immigration volunteers, cos this is foreign national prison, so if you can bring volunteers that know about immigration stuff...legal advice.” (Prison)

“More people to help foreign nationals...like translators. As an equality rep on A wing there are 50% foreign nationals, many issues with language and over sentence. More volunteers in this area.” (Prison)

“Foreign national prison, for instance where culture understanding is lacking a lot do you understand? So it’s easy for officers and inmates to become confrontational because officers are not trained in the cultural understanding, nor have they probably, wherever they were grown up or raised up, they are not used to mixing with so many different cultural interaction[s] and integration[s].” (Prison)

“Even religious celebrations, volunteers will be better, because the officers don’t understand the world we live in. There are volunteers that understand differently for all the different religions.” (Prison)

“Diversity and equality: instead of the staff carry it out, the volunteers carry it out for both the staff and the inmate.” (Prison)

**PROMOTING
GOOD CHARACTER
AND ENHANCING
GOOD BEHAVIOUR
WITHIN FROM
OFFENDERS SO THAT
THEY WILL NOT
REOFFEND AGAIN.**

(Prison)

The independent nature of volunteers led to suggestions that, alongside their main roles, they could provide an impartial voice within the prison.

“Even the healthcare assistant as well. In any life you have discrimination in one way or another. The volunteers are interacting between the prisoners and the officers, the officers and the prisoners will always know that there is an independent body that’s observing them.” (Prison)

“If anyone is volunteering, someone that is giving up their own valuable time, to dedicate to something they feel passionate about, for them to sit down and see a form [of] abuse of the system, a form of discrimination, a form of injustice will play in the conscience so they will voice whatever wrong they see within the right authorities.” (Prison)

Those who had been through prison suggested further needs for volunteers.

“There is a requirement for life coaching and/or counselling services to be provided.” (Community)

“Many relationships falter when someone is in custody. Perhaps a Relate type service to help people through this.” (Community)

2.1.4 Benefits to volunteers

There was a strong consensus amongst both current and ex-service users that there are important benefits for those who volunteer in prison. For most current service users this was perceived as a chance to help others, as well as a few who mentioned the opportunity for volunteers to also learn beneficial skills.

“They get the chance to help other people and to make a change in people and their self.” (Prison)

“To make a change in peoples’ lives.” (Prison)

“They get a feeling that they are either contributing or giving back to society. Self-esteem, achievement. To get into a line of work.” (Prison)

“A sense of doing something, making a contribution.” (Prison)

“They get experience.” (Prison)

Ex-service user volunteers also emphasised the ability to develop professionally and personally, with more specific examples of what this meant to them.

“I have learnt lots of skills, computer skills and stuff but mostly self-esteem, I feel confident. I feel now that I can talk to anyone whereas before I wouldn’t mix with society, I would separate.” (Ex-service user)

“You feel good about yourself. You can get a reference, and that in the eyes of an employer, since you’re willing to participate in any position and benefit from it, there are loads of benefits from it and for me the benefits of volunteering is huge. I’d highly recommend it to anyone.” (Ex-service user)

“It has opened up opportunities for me. I have been offered a couple of jobs with different organisations where I did volunteer.” (Ex-service user)

“A SENSE OF DOING SOMETHING, MAKING A CONTRIBUTION.”

(Prison)

"I think for me just like communication, learning to communicate with people, emails." (Ex-service user)

"Learning new skillsets. Learning different ways of dealing with things in a more professional way and just growing as a person." (Ex-service user)

For some of the volunteers in the focus group, there were further benefits of their work. For some volunteering demonstrated that they were able to move on with their lives after a sentence. Being a volunteer provided an ex-service user with the chance to adopt an alternative, more positive identity other than an offender or ex-offender. Ultimately, the removal of this label provided hope for the individual.

“ *[Volunteering has] given me inspiration to move forward definitely... people look at my convictions that date back decades and think I've got no chance, but then I find this organisation and yeah it gives you hope."* (Ex-service user)

"Gives volunteers the know-how that they can change how they are seen too, so not known for being in jail." (Ex-service user)

A more practical advantage of volunteering in prisons was mentioned, whereby volunteers are able to maintain an understanding of current issues within their field, such as housing, which is demonstrated below.

“ *I suppose it was, you're learning all the time with it, I think you can get a little bit complacent with it and you can think oh yeah I've been there...I had to go [back] in there to still see what the problems were, because I could've lost sight and thought well, I haven't had anyone coming up to me saying they haven't got anywhere to live so I had to go in to see if those issues were still going on."* (Ex-service user)



“ **GIVES VOLUNTEERS THE KNOW-HOW THAT THEY CAN CHANGE HOW THEY ARE SEEN TOO, SO NOT KNOWN FOR BEING IN JAIL.**

(Ex-service user)

2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF VOLUNTEERS

2.2.1 Motivation

Throughout focus groups with current service users, volunteers were discussed in very favourable terms. As discussed, this was primarily due to the fact volunteers were seen to be focused on helping those they work with.

“ Prisoner 1: “The sentence plan and OASys organisation in the prison [should be carried out by volunteers], because all know I can’t get my sentence plan or OASys.”

Prisoner 2: “They don’t wanna give it to you.”

Prisoner 3: “Volunteers will be more motivated to help you.” (Prison)

When asked, participants responded that they did not mind what had originally motivated a volunteer to get involved. More important to service users was the contact with people who are committed to working on a positive activity.

“ [Volunteers have been] ones that want to help, ones that need experience...[who they are] doesn’t matter, but it can help to connect with us prisoners.” (Prison)

“I don’t think [their motivation matters], they’ve made a commitment to volunteer. If a wing sees four people committing themselves to whatever it might be I don’t think it matters.” (Community)

It was the motivation of volunteers, rather than the cause of motivation, that encouraged service users to engage with their services.

“ Yes the motivation [of volunteers] helps to motivate the inmates.” (Prison)

“My mentality as an inmate was ‘I ain’t doing nothing for nothing’ if I do something I expected something back in return all the time. I think the lads get that you don’t have to come in here off your own back because you wanna share your experience and it shows that there is a way out so it’s just started changing I think.” (Community)

For the ex-service users themselves, motivation was focused on making use of their experience as ex-service users to help others. It should be noted that all volunteers interviewed were ex-service users.

“ For me personally it’s because I’ve been in prison myself, and I kind of wanted to go back there to show the women that it’s not all negative when you get out of prison, that there are opportunities for people, and tell them about my life since I’ve come out and tell them about the organisations that have helped me and tell them how I’ve done it to try and give them some hope for when they get out.” (Ex-service user)

“I wanted to volunteer cos obviously my experience would benefit others.” (Ex-service user)

**“ THEY
CHALLENGED YOU,
THEY MOTIVATED YOU,
YOU WENT THERE FOR
SUPPORT.
(Community)**

This motivation was also evident amongst some service users who had not yet volunteered.

“*I just wanna know what chance we’ve got as ex-offenders to go in prisons and help people.*” (Community)

A further motivation relates to volunteers reinforcing their identity beyond that which they had whilst in prison.

“*For me personally it was to show the officers that I had changed my life around as well.*” (Ex-service user)

2.2.2 Lived experience

For both service users and ex-service users there were several benefits to having volunteers with lived experience of the Criminal Justice System, as mentioned in section 2.1.3. In the delivery of services, this lived experience was seen to improve understanding and communication with those individuals that volunteers are working with.

“*Being able to relate to someone that’s been through this experience.*” (Prison)

“They know how to communicate with offenders. [They’re] the same level, easy to talk to. They know the inmates and the system.” (Prison)

“[Ex-offenders] can identify the troubles I’ve been through and give me the experience and the confidence to say ‘you know what, I’ve been through it.’” (Community)

It was for this reason that some participants thought there should be more ex-offenders who volunteer within prison.

“*[There should be] more volunteers that are ex-offenders because they understand about it.*” (Prison)

The benefit of having improved communication between service users and ex-service users was also highlighted by volunteers.

“*We was all ex-service users so we could relate to the women and relate to what they were going through. We found that they would talk to us rather than talk to an officer.*” (Ex-service user)

“I’m a big big big believer in that you have to have been there to appreciate what someone else is going through. I’m really honest about my background...I think for people in prison to relate to anyone, because you do get that hardened off thing of ‘you don’t know what I’m going through.’ I think the volunteers, you need to have been where that person is for them to have any kind of relationship with you.” (Ex-service user)

Similarly, both the ex-service users and prison groups referred to the likelihood of greater trust developing between people who have a shared experience.

“*The benefit is massive. I get that the lads don’t really trust anyone. If you’re in authority, [prisoners are] not gonna tell you what’s going on for them cos they think it’s going to get them into more trouble.*” (Ex-service user)

“It creates trust.” (Prison)

“**THE BENEFIT IS MASSIVE. I GET THAT THE LADS DON’T REALLY TRUST ANYONE.**”

(Prison)

Most frequently mentioned by both service users and ex-service users was the ability of people who had been through the Criminal Justice System to inspire hope in others by demonstration their ability to desist from crime and engage in positive activity.

“ Identification, feeling what that person’s been through and for them to identify and feel there’s a hope.” (Ex-service user)

“As an ex-offender, it just shows that there is hope and that’s a massive thing, to think there is some light at the end of the tunnel.”
(Community)

“If I can go back in the flesh and the officers can say ‘bloody hell you’ve come a long way’ then I think it would help a lot of the other service users.” (Ex-service user)

“I think being an ex-offender, being inside a prison, it speaks volumes. It gives those service users hope because it gave me hope.”
(Ex-service user)

“I use it to my best advantage. Once upon a time it was something that wasn’t getting me nowhere at all but I’ve reversed it now and I use it to my own advantage. I think that once you’ve got that strive and you can show people ‘this is me today’ they’re going to go for it.”
(Ex-service user)

“They loved it, I actually saw people that I knew, they was blown away, really encouraged by it. Two people that I spoke to when we was there said that they would love to get involved with what we’re doing as a direct result of seeing [what] me and other prisoners were like, when I shared my experience and all that, you could see it in them that they could see a possibility and a way out of it, they felt inspired. It gives them hope, you could see in their eyes.” (Ex-service user)

For one service user, understanding and trust through lived experience were essential aspects for volunteers to provide for there to be effective engagement.

“ *With this fella I was uptight and the moment he opened his mouth I was just relaxed because he’s been through everything. I could identify what he’s been through and vice versa. It was a massive weight off my shoulders, I was thinking gosh this geezer is going to judge me what do I disclose what don’t I say, he’s been through what I’ve been through plus worse and it just felt good honestly. I can be myself, I don’t have to act, I don’t have to hide nothing.”* (Community)

However, whilst benefits were recognised, most participants stated that lived experience was not essential to provide effective voluntary services and the motivation to provide help and assistance for free was still greatly welcomed and respected.

“ *People that want to help, that are useful and are motivated to help, they don’t have to live up to the experience, just have to care in what they want to achieve.”* (Prison)

“I don’t care who that person is, as long as that person can feel my pain at that time.” (Community)

**“ I THINK BEING
AN EX-OFFENDER,
BEING INSIDE A
PRISON, IT SPEAKS
VOLUMES. IT GIVES
THOSE SERVICE
USERS HOPE BECAUSE
IT GAVE ME HOPE.**

(Ex-service user)

“ I don't mind if the person hasn't been through the system as long as they can identify what that person is going through and give them the right feedback, the right support or the right advice.” (Community)

Yeah I do feel it is important but I wouldn't say it's the be all and end all for every single volunteer because there are people out there that want to volunteer and help people that haven't been through that experience they just have sympathy. But I do think when you have lived experience you have more of an understanding and knowledge of how to help people in that situation.” (Ex-service user)

For one participant, those volunteers who are not ex-service users also provide a unique inspiration to those they are working with.

“ I think someone who has not been an ex-offender volunteering speaks for itself because they are taking up their own time.” (Community)

2.3 DELIVERING VOLUNTARY SERVICES IN PRISON

2.3.1 Access to prison

For ex-service user volunteers, issues around obtaining security clearance provided the greatest barrier to accessing volunteering opportunities in prison.

“ I think that has been a massive thing at every prison I’ve ever been trying to do. The security is the problem.” (Ex-service user)

“I think it’s security, I think that’s all it is. I think they’re so scared in regards to security that they want the least amount of people going in as possible. I think if it’s the governor and I’m saying we’ll help reduce your re-offending because not only will we work with them now, we’ll work with them as soon as they get out, no-one is going to turn that down, unless there is a real fear.” (Ex-service user)

Volunteers stated that their services outside of the prison suffered due to the difficulties they faced in obtaining security clearance to the prison.

“ You’re not letting me in, I am now having to rely on referrals coming via a probation service, we may only have one. I’ve got eight places.” (Ex-service user)

Those who had experienced problems with security stated that they were happy to be accommodating to the prison in order to allay any security concerns, but were not given this opportunity.

“ [I went to one prison] and it was a no. Completely shut down. They’ll help, they’ll refer people but I can’t go in and talk to them. I found it frustrating. What do you think I’m going to come in and do? You can search me, you can do whatever, I’m not coming into the prison for the fun of it.” (Ex-service user)

“I get the risk, I understand that, I understand that they could be wary. Follow me round, sit with me, stand with me. That’s what happened in [prison] when they let me in, I was escorted and an officer had to stay in the room with me the first time. I understand that but don’t refuse me access that could stop these women from re-offending.” (Ex-service user)

There were suggestions from volunteers that the process of applying for security clearance to volunteer should be personal in order to adequately demonstrate the risk posed by each volunteer. There were also suggestions that the context of the volunteering should be taken into account, such as the time spent with an organisation.

“ Talk to you and find out a little bit more about you rather than just assuming that you’re going to come in and run havoc.” (Ex-service user)

“Like for security and various other reasons. But I think if you’ve been volunteering for an organisation for more than 3 to 6 months you know why not, why not let them in?” (Ex-service user)

**“ THEY NEED TO
LOOK CLOSER AT
THE RISK ELEMENT.**

(Ex-service user)

These issues were explicitly exacerbated for some participants due to previous convictions.

“Once you’ve come out of prison and you’ve got your record, to actually get back into the prison as a volunteer is very difficult. It almost feels like you are going to be managed out of that process sometimes, it’s a difficult barrier to overcome.” (Ex-service user)

“With [a voluntary organisation], a lot of us went in as one offs and I found that was easy, it was done as an event, but I also tried to go in on a regular basis but that was a lot harder...it was my previous yeah, previous criminal convictions. I think they wanted me to be longer out of prison before I went back in.” (Ex-service user)

Again, ex-service user volunteers advocated what they saw as a more personal and individual approach to security vetting, as a means to overcome this barrier for people who have something beneficial to provide to the prison.

“I think interviewing on a one-to-one basis, what they have done since they left prison, should also be taken into account. Formal interview, like using points, what you score on for different things like rehabilitation, cos for some people their rehabilitation is very fast. What they may have done before they left prison, like their prison record. Yeah all sorts of stuff could be taken into consideration but not just when was the last time they were in prison cos that for me is not giving people a chance, it’s just saying ‘right, if you have been in prison in the past 5 years then you can’t be rehabilitated’, it’s crazy.” (Ex-service user)

“[The prison should look at] what issues have they addressed since being out, drug issues and that, are they volunteering somewhere else. Have they made positive steps, will they have references?” (Ex-service user)

They need to look closer at the risk element. They used a bit of that; I’m still on license, but my license is clear. There’s no restrictions on my license. There’s never been a breach. All the time I was in there was nothing against me at all. I had more access when I was in there, than what I’ve got out here trying to get in there.” (Ex-service user)

A number of ex-service users stated that they found the process of applying for security clearance complicated. This was stated to particularly adversely affect potential volunteers who do not have the conventional skills or resources necessary to complete the lengthy application processes.

“I tried to volunteer but then all this red tape came up. It was down to the governor, who kind of put me off the idea. I really wanted to go in but he really put me off the idea because you still had to do all these bits and bobs.” (Ex-service user)

“They said they had to contact people and NOMS and all this stuff, when it came back, it’s gone stupid. All that red tape stuff, and all that DBS business started up.” (Ex-service user)

“[The vetting process] was quite scary you know. There’s a lot in there. For me at that point of time with computers and that, I weren’t sort of computer literate and it was tricky. The first one I got I couldn’t complete it.” (Ex-service user)

“I TRIED TO
VOLUNTEER BUT
THEN ALL THIS RED
TAPE CAME UP.

(Ex-service user)

“ I had a certain length of time to do it in and there was just too much in there and I couldn’t handle it.” (Ex-service user)

“If I hadn’t been the sort of person that I was and keep fighting them and fighting them and fighting them, I’d have given up and then we wouldn’t have women getting into employment and women getting accommodation.” (Ex-service user)

“It was just a ‘no, can’t let you in’ but there was no reasonings. Alright I didn’t push [the prison], I just accepted it because I’ve got 101 other things that need to be done.” (Ex-service user)

“It’s not easy at all due to all the hoops they have to jump through.” (Prisoners)

Sometimes, even without the application process however, there was no clear route into volunteering within a particular prison.

“ I actually tried to go in there to do a workshop and basically I just kept getting passed from one person to another saying ‘speak to this person’ and then when I speak to that person they say ‘oh no, it’s down to another person’ and it just got left in the air and no one ever really got back to me.” (Ex-service user)

“[You need] a SPOC [Single Point of Contact]. Someone to fire off all the questions at and they’ll have all the answers or they’ll know where to find them to go and get our answers.” (Ex-service user)

“I think that is quite relevant because you don’t know all the restrictions, it’s all hearsay. If it was clear and people just know what they’re doing and what to expect. It saves a lot of wasted time, stops people getting their hopes up.” (Ex-service user)

A common complaint involved the varying nature of accessing prisons depending on the discretion of each prison.

“ I think there needs to be some kind of standardisation across the board though because there’s too many inconsistencies across prisons so there needs to be something that’s sort of like you know you’re getting the same service from everywhere because it’s not really fair. One person might be turned down for something but in another place not everybody’s being turned down so not everywhere is equal.” (Ex-service user)

“In one respect I was lucky because the organisation I was working with, the governor of [prison] sat on the board. There was a little bit of: it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. However he left, and once he left then it became tougher to get in there. There was a governor who didn’t know me, there was all new staff that didn’t know me and it was very much then ‘well, who are you?’” (Ex-service user)

“All prisons have got their own rules haven’t they? That’s another thing.” (Ex-service user)

“If you’ve got a progressive governor who will let you back in the prison that’s great, but there are so many that don’t and then [prisoners] don’t get access to those services based on that particular governor’s hang-ups about letting volunteers or even ex-offenders back in the prison.” (Community)

“ I HAD A CERTAIN LENGTH OF TIME TO DO IT IN AND THERE WAS JUST TOO MUCH IN THERE AND I COULDN’T HANDLE IT.

(Ex-service user)

A final difficulty detailed by volunteers was the experience itself of going back to prison having served a sentence there.

“For me, the biggest challenge was going back to a prison where I had served. Obviously when I walked out of there I ain't coming back, and then I'm coming back, on the other side. I actually froze on the spot to say that I can't actually do this, I can't walk in. I thought I was quite confident when I left, but then going back there I was all like 'no you're alright I'll leave this, is there someone else that wants to do it?' For me it was showing the women that, you know what, it can be alright. Yes it can be tough but look, I've walked back.” (Ex-service user)

Current service users also mentioned issues of security, but provided some unique points of view from a prison perspective. For example, service users stated that there was a need for better communication with the prison population to advertise services available.

“[There needs to be] greater awareness of what they offer and the benefits of such a service; enhanced communication; great access to prisoners; more open day events.” (Community)

“Communication – get the message out there about what help and support is available. Make the volunteers visible, get prison buy in, more open day events, promote success stories.” (Community)

A focus of this communication, according to service users, needs to be with staff, as they are a key stakeholder in securing access to services provided by volunteers.

“Engage with staff at the ground level, not just the SLT, [to] win hearts and minds.” (Community)

“Unless you have staff on board with what the volunteers are doing then there could be barriers.” (Prison)

“Barriers include negative comments [from staff], restriction of movements.” (Prison)

Service users also stated that, from their perspective, volunteers were seen as a threat to the isolated nature of a prison and its security, and were therefore thought to be discouraged by the prison.

“They seem to store up everything in the prison and not try and make any information go back out. Like the way we've been treated.” (Prison)

“They know they've got an establishment that's decrepit and dilapidated, that's dysfunctional. To let outside bodies in has become such an institutionalised cut off system. In order to let outside bodies in to see what's going on, it's hard.” (Prison)

Finally, cost was also seen as a final barrier, with not enough staff to adequately facilitate volunteers. However, from service users' perspectives the cost benefit of volunteers was not taken into account.

“The prison system is saying that we haven't got enough money for this and that, but then if you look at the cost of reoffending and keeping tabs of reoffenders. Compared to if they have volunteer schemes with retired experienced people or people that's working in the field.” (Prison)

“FOR ME, THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS GOING BACK TO A PRISON WHERE I HAD SERVED.”

(Ex-service user)

“IT DEPENDS ON THE PERSON YOU ARE DEALING WITH, I.E. STAFF. SOME STAFF DON'T LIKE EX-OFFENDERS OR OTHER VOLUNTEERS, THEY ARE SEEN AS A THREAT TO PRISON JOBS.”

(Prison)

2.3.2 Reception from prison

There was recognition from service users that a cooperative relationship between prison staff and volunteers is needed for the delivery of voluntary services.

“Staff [need to be] working hand-in-hand with volunteers to make them feel welcome in the prison.” (Prison)

In contrast though, the majority of current service users felt that volunteers were treated fairly poorly by staff when working in prison.

“From a prisoner's experience they are seen as helping us. From the staff side I think they are looked at as less than officers.” (Prison)

“They're treated like their presence is useless and they're looked down on.” (Prison)

“By staff, volunteers are unwelcomed, so they get treated differently.” (Prison)

“They don't really treat how they should be and are looked down on.” (Prison)

“No one cares about the volunteers. They are treated less than paid staff...volunteers are not treated very well by most prison staff with the prison. It's not easy at all [for volunteers to work in prison].” (Prison)

One service user thought that some staff perceive volunteers as a threat to their own work within the prison.

“It depends on the person you are dealing with, i.e. staff. Some staff don't like ex-offenders or other volunteers, they are seen as a threat to prison jobs.” (Prison)

However, a small number of service users stated that staff could be receptive of volunteers, especially those from certain services.

“Some staff get behind volunteers because they see the benefits. Samaritans and Shannon Trust are prime examples, although some staff don't. They are allowed access and provided with the required time and resources.” (Community)

“They are treated OK by prisoners and prison staff.” (Prison)

Experiences of ex-service user volunteers were more mixed when it came to treatment by prison staff. A number reported positive interactions with staff.

“Yeah, very well, the whole team of us that was in there I thought was received very well, by all the staff. Didn't have no issues.” (Ex-service user)

“They were beautiful, they were fantastic.” (Ex-service user)

However, there were instances of poor treatment too, particularly in relation to ex-service user volunteers disclosing their previous offending behaviour within the prison, and the effect this had on their relationships with staff.

“Some were really good, some were actually proud of what you'd achieved and then there were others that wanted to knock you down.” (Ex-service user)

“The only interaction I’ve had with officers was recently and it wasn’t too good. Just from like using the car park which I’d got authorisation for and stuff like that, just extremely rude.” (Ex-service user)

The volunteers in our sample voiced generally positive experiences from service users, which included those who did not engage with their services.

“I had a few that just wasn’t interested prisoners, just didn’t want to interact at all, they just wanted to get on with it and I understood that, I’ve been in that position so I didn’t force it but none really negative. Majority was positive, even when they didn’t want to interact they would say no thanks.” (Ex-service user)

“Really positive feedback [from prisoners]. Not just for myself but other people that have gone in. Yeah they were good as gold. Really welcoming, really grateful that people were giving up their time to go and speak to them.” (Ex-service user)



“STAFF [NEED TO BE] WORKING HAND-IN-HAND WITH VOLUNTEERS TO MAKE THEM FEEL WELCOME IN THE PRISON.

(Prison)

3. CONCLUSIONS

The current service users and ex-service users who took part in this consultation provided feedback on the perceptions of volunteering in prison from the perspective of the service users in the Criminal Justice System. The findings were separated into three key themes:

- Experience of volunteers and volunteering
- Characteristics of volunteers
- Delivering voluntary services in prison.

The experiences of services provided by volunteers varied across the focus groups and it was identified that there was little opportunity for prisoners to work with volunteers. In addition it was stated that many voluntary services were not well advertised within certain prisons. However, there was positive feedback from one prison of an increase in the amount of voluntary services over recent months. Furthermore, a significant number of participants involved were positive about the impact volunteers made within a prison. Lastly, service-users within prison and the community identified a number of areas where having volunteers deliver services instead of prison staff would be an advantage, in particular to help rehabilitate prisoners and help resolve tension between authority and those service users subject to authority.



There was robust agreement amongst current and ex-service users relating to the important benefits for those who volunteer in prison.

In particular, the majority of current service users perceived this as an opportunity to help others as well gain beneficial skills. Ex-service users accentuated the ability to develop on a personal and professional level. Ex-service users were seen as being a positive influence on motivation for current service users as they were perceived to be focused on helping those they work with. It was this perceived desire to help others, rather than any other motivations behind ex-service users' volunteering, that encouraged current service users to engage with them.

It was identified that having volunteers with a lived experience of the Criminal Justice System was beneficial to both service-users and those who are volunteering, as it was perceived to improve communication and understanding between those individuals that volunteers work with. Furthermore, through this it was identified that communication and trust were also improved.

Issues surrounding security for ex-service user volunteers were found to be the greatest barrier to accessing volunteering opportunities in prison, which in turn affected the services available. There were many suggestions relating to the process of applying security clearance to volunteers from the volunteers themselves such as changing the process to a more personal approach to the individual in order to demonstrate the risk posed by each volunteer. The complicated process of applying was also identified as a barrier for potential volunteers due to them not always having the necessary literacy skills or resources to complete the lengthy application process.

Lastly, service users recognised that prison staff and volunteers need to work together in order to ensure that volunteers feel part of a team.

Ex-service user volunteers had mixed experiences in relation to how they were treated by prison staff. Some had experienced positive interactions, however it was also noted that some volunteers felt that their relationship with prison staff suffered due to them disclosing their previous offending behaviour.

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4. ABOUT USER VOICE & CLINKS



User Voice is an ex-offender led charity. Since being founded in 2009, we have given a voice to over 25,000 people and currently facilitate representative structures for around 1 in 3 criminal justice service users.

Our core belief is that rehabilitation only happens when everyone in the Criminal Justice System shares responsibility for transforming the 'us vs. them' division into real collaboration

Our role is to improve rehabilitation through collaboration. User Voice builds the structures that enable productive collaboration between service users and service providers. We are able to do this because our work is led and delivered by ex-offenders. This gives us the ability to gain the trust of, access to, and insight from people within the Criminal Justice System.

Our unique work in prisons and probation, with youth offending teams and other related services, has an impact both on individuals, by promoting active citizenship, and services, which become more efficient and cost effective.



Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation supporting voluntary sector organisations in the Criminal Justice System. Our aim is to ensure the sector and the people it supports are informed and engaged in order to transform lives and communities. We are a membership organisation with over 600 members including the voluntary sector's largest providers as well as the smallest; our wider national network reaches over 4,000 voluntary sector contacts.



Tavis House
1-6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
020 7383 0966
info@clinks.org
@Clinks_Tweets
www.clinks.org



User Voice
20 Newburn Street
London SE11 5PJ
020 3137 7471
info@uservoice.org
@uservoice.org
www.uservoice.org

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