Young offenders’ insights into tackling youth crime and its causes
WHAT’S YOUR STORY?

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YOUNG OFFENDERS’ INSIGHTS INTO TACKLING YOUTH CRIME AND ITS CAUSES
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For those young people who took part in this project – while many welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences with people who have ‘walked in their shoes’ – this has not been an easy journey. User Voice would like to thank them for working in partnership with us: we hope that you all recognise your individual and collective contribution and that we have done you justice.

User Voice would also like to thank those people who have worked in partnership with us through different stages of the project, from inception through to this important stage. We are very grateful to the staff, at the various consultation sites for supporting us and arranging the group discussions. We would like to thank: Mark Bertram, Jeff Ogden and Rachel O’Brien who have been critical in analysing the data; Katie Kinnaird and Tom Mallion for capturing the project on film; Speech Debelle for engaging young people through music and translating their experiences and Bernadette McGee.

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The policy discussion forum User Voice held in Westminster involved 30 of the young people nominated by their peers to represent them. Thanks to them for making it through the snow and to the Open Space facilitators, Belinda Sosinowicz and Roma Iskander for their help in making the day run smoothly. Finally, thanks to the practitioners and policy makers – including MPs and Peers, representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), National Offender Management Service (NOMS), the Youth Justice Board, probation and the private sector – who took part in User Voice’s policy discussion forum. We thank you for listening and hope that you will take action from their insights.
During the past year, I have had the pleasure of seeing first-hand the unique work carried out by User Voice with, and on behalf of, children and young people who are ex-offenders or at risk of offending.

The stories and experiences that are expressed in the pages that follow are of special interest to me as Children’s Commissioner for England. I am charged with adding my voice to and challenging, when necessary, what is happening in the youth justice system. All of my work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This universal convention outlines our nation’s commitment to all of its children and young people, no matter how difficult their lives might be.

The views and opinions in this report are a poignant reminder of the important role we all have in ensuring that children, particularly those who are most vulnerable, have the best support possible if we want them to be positive and constructive citizens.

Mark Johnson, the founder of User Voice, is passionate about the need for policy makers to understand the reasons why children and young people commit crimes. He advocates the benefits of involving them in the development of crime prevention strategies if we are to re-focus our energies and target resources to the most needed areas.

The young people’s stories included here provide us with their own take on the current workings of the youth justice system. Through their honest accounts - like Ryan’s story, which runs as a thread throughout the fabric of this report - we can begin to identify the gaps in the required services and support mechanisms to prevent others like them from getting into trouble.

However, it is important to note that User Voice also recognises and vehemently stresses the need for young people to face up to what they have done and for them to fully understand the consequences of their actions. The organisation does not, as some may initially assume,
advocate for a ‘soft’ approach in the rehabilitation of the young. Their stance is to make us aware of the potential social and economic pitfalls if we fail to adequately engage early on with these often vulnerable young people.

It is true, as this report clearly shows, that many children are slipping through the net of the youth justice system and go on to re-offend. As a result, doubts are raised about the robustness of the strategies to reduce youth crime. But let’s not forget the dedication and determination of those working steadily in communities and within government to develop a system that can successfully divert young people away from a life of crime.

Many of the young people I meet who have been and those who are currently in the youth justice system tell me that despite their background or circumstance, they are determined to be and to do better in their lives. We must do everything we can to support them in this often difficult journey.

This publication comes at an opportune moment. It coincides with the Government’s wish to examine afresh how we treat offenders of all ages. I hope that policy and decision-makers, practitioners and young people use it as a benchmark for how well we treat young people who are getting into trouble and to test our commitment to involve them in developing the strategies to bring about change.

Maggie Atkinson
Children’s Commissioner for England
INTRODUCTION

This is the second and final report of User Voice’s Excluded Youth Project that was launched in summer 2010. Since then we have undertaken 22 discussion groups in six regions with 325 of the most marginalised young people in England (see Figure 1). We also conducted a survey, which was completed by 582 excluded young people between the ages of 12 and 27. This provides important information about the young people involved:

- A fifth had received 10 or more different types of sentence.
- 43% had spent time in a young offenders’ institution or prison.
- 45% said they had drink/drug problems.
- 16% said they had experienced mental health problems.
- 17% of participants had been in care at some stage.
- Less than a third had only experienced living with both their parents while growing up.
- Nearly one in 10 (9%) had never lived with either parent.
- 71% had been excluded from school.
- Just under a third had been tested at some stage for learning difficulties.

Through consultation, our project has revealed staggering levels of system failure: most of the young people reported that there had been no interventions to help them cope as children with problems like parental violence and neglect. Their experiences of most agencies had been poor and social workers and the police in particular were regarded with deep negativity.

The purpose here is not simply to restate these problems: few people have more desire in finding solutions than those we have worked with. Rather, this report aims to build on our interim findings, published at the end of 2010, and to reflect the discussions that took place between 30 of the young people – nominated by their peers – and policy makers, including MPs and representatives from the MoJ, NOMS, the London...
Probation Service, the Youth Justice Board and private contractors currently managing prisons.

The day was designed as a policy discussion forum with a difference: the emphasis in the run up was to build the young people's confidence in public speaking and in articulating the issues and ideas that had arisen throughout the consultation. Our aim was to ensure equal participation between service users and policy makers and the day was structured around developing priorities for change. Some specific recommendations are set out in the final chapter of this report and will continue to inform the final stages of the project. Feedback from the day itself highlighted the scarcity of opportunities for shared dialogue like this and the powerful impact that this can have on all those involved.

For most of the young people involved, the only thing that's known about them is their criminal record. Their willingness to engage shows that they can and want to make a positive contribution. They also want to place their offending in this context: the violence, deprivation, poverty and exclusion of their childhoods. Many want to express their anger.

Many readers will have had no other opportunity to hear the voices of excluded youth. Hanging around in threatening groups on street corners, the young people whose views are expressed here are unlikely to be engaged in meaningful dialogue by anyone, let alone the policy makers. At User Voice ex-offenders help and encourage young people to talk about their lives, to express their views and to articulate their hopes and fears.

This report seeks to share their stories.¹ While they are all unique in their way, what is striking is how often the same issues arise. Most of these young people started life on the margins: their experiences do not represent those of a cross section of the population but the result of generational poverty, exclusion and deprivation. For many, this project has been the first time anyone has asked them how they can contribute to breaking this cycle. And for most it is the first time someone has listened.

¹ We have included here quotes from many of the young people who participated: names and locations have been changed to ensure anonymity.
FIGURE 1: the User Voice Excluded Youth Project engagement sites
RYAN

There is not much to know. I grew up without a dad so I didn’t really have a male role model in the family. My granddad was not the kindest of people. He’d been an army ex-server so he suffered a lot.

I hit puberty very early for my age: I already had a deepening voice and I was pushing 5’8” when I went into year 7. I was a lot taller, a lot more mature than all the other kids there, so I got a lot of bullying for my first two years. The bullies had put my self-confidence and self-esteem so low that I was starting to self-harm. And because of that my mum then took me to my GP. I went on anti-depressants at the end of the year 8 and I put on a bit of weight. So I got a lot of bullying for my weight and for being short-tempered. People knew how to push my buttons so I got into a lot of fights. Between the end of year 6 and leaving school in year 11, I’d been excluded 18 times. Either for fighting, swearing and generally being abusive towards teachers.

I didn’t feel like I had anyone I could talk to so I lashed out. My mum tried to get me help from the child and mental health services: they saw me once or twice but they didn’t feel that there was anything they could help me with at the time. I had a lot of mental health problems and diagnoses that were eventually made. These ranged from bullying and depression, to not enough support from home – which is a horrible thing to say – but it was how I felt.

I talked to a few people. When I told them, the bullying would stop for a couple of days, but then when it came back it was worse to the extent that I wouldn’t tell anyone. Half way through year 10 I came out as a bi-sexual, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do at any time in your life. I was in sports teams, so a lot of my peers felt that because I was bi-sexual that I was looking at them. They gave me a hell of a hard time for that. I started skiving school and lying as to why I wasn’t going in. In year 10, I reckon that I was only in for about three months because of the bullying.

At about 12 or 13, I got into a fight in school and got my nose broken. I ended up in hospital and I got a half-day exclusion and the other person got a two-week exclusion. My mum felt it was important to take it to the police. They had photographs from the hospital, statements from the school, statements from me and from the boy that punched me. They decided to take it as no further action. I can’t understand why: I found that quite upsetting at the time.
USER VOICE

User Voice exists to reduce offending. Our work is led and delivered by ex-offenders who foster dialogue between users and providers of the criminal justice and related services. We enable unheard voices to make a difference and enable policy makers and practitioners to listen directly to service users.

While User Voice aims to be a powerful advocate on behalf of offenders and others on the margins, it does this through robust but constructive engagement with those who have the power to design services and make decisions. Our aim is to act as a ‘referee’: ensuring that no one group’s agenda dominates and that engagement benefits all. The result can be a recognition of how little impact current approaches are having on re-offending levels and the lives of people who are most excluded. The entrenched exclusion and complex needs of some of the people we work with can be a huge obstacle to service providers.

While working with User Voice can be a powerful rehabilitative experience, unlike many providers we are primarily focused on working with users to deliver broader system change, not meeting their individual needs. Likewise, while we are far from agnostic about the moral argument for enabling ex-offenders to start afresh, we do not start projects with a pre-conceived list of policy objectives.

We are well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in crime. The involvement of ex-offenders has many benefits, not least of which is the narrative of success. Working with ex-offenders can be a powerful way of motivating people who often have little self-belief that they can overcome the barriers they face. We recruit qualified and talented ex-offenders. This has a profound impact on employees’ self-confidence and transforms their long-term employment prospects. User Voice demonstrates the hugely positive role ex-offenders can play given the right circumstances.

“You’re the first person that I’ve met that does this sort of thing. I think it’s amazing. It means someone to look up to. It’s something that’s gonna give me the courage to do better, its meeting you. Because you have turned your life around and if you can do it, anyone can.”
RORY, NORTH EAST

“My boss tried to be a support for me, but at first I didn’t get it, as I don’t trust anyone. Growing up I thought he was a fed: why is he watching me? So, I didn’t talk to him. It took a while for me to realise he is not. I slowly built up respect for him. He is one of only probably five people in that I trust.”
ROB, SOUTH EAST
If you start working with kids from a young age, say about 9-10 years old. If you’re tackling them from a young age then you’re gonna be brought up with all that influence, then they’re gonna come to a time when bad influence is coming to them and they’re gonna think nah, that’s not right, I shouldn’t be doing that cause of what you’ve been taught.

SIOBHAN, MIDLANDS

My best friend, she’s like me really. She takes drugs, commits crime. She does bad things. She’s understanding. Other people I just get all the chat: “what you doing that for?” I don’t want to hear that.

SHIRIN, NORTH WEST

One thing people have to understand with young people is that they are gonna make mistakes and do stupid things. We don’t think of all the consequences before. People don’t tell us that if you do this, this will happen and all that.

SCOTT, SOUTH EAST

History

User Voice was founded by Mark Johnson, an ex-offender and former drug abuser, best-selling author of Wasted and social commentator. Mark’s experiences of prison, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and consultant taking on various roles within the criminal justice system and voluntary sector, left him convinced of the need to create a model of engagement that is fair and incentive led. His aim was to foster dialogue between service providers and users that is mutually beneficial and which results in better and more cost-effective services.

What do we do?

- **User Voice councils** that can be developed for use within prisons or in the community for probation, youth offending teams and related services.
- **Bespoke consultancy**: User Voice works with clients to design projects aimed at accessing, hearing and acting upon the insights of those who are hardest to reach, including prisoners, ex-offenders and those at risk of crime. These projects include staff and user consultations, workshops and research.
- **Advocacy**: through speeches and opinion we present the models, practices and business case behind User Voice in order to inspire and influence key audiences. We also create opportunities for the people we work with to meet and speak to those in power.

User Voice received charitable status in 2010. In its short life it has completed a number of projects and established a strong reputation. This includes: creating new prison councils involving staff and prisoners; work with veterans, and consultations on skills and employment, drug and alcohol services, social services and probation.

In 2011 User Voice will undertake new projects including work with foreign nationals and women in prison, a social enterprise initiative and community councils.

User Voice and young people

User Voice works with a range of age groups, but much of its activity to date has been with those under the age of 25. This is not surprising given the demographics of the prison population and those who commit crime.

Our work has included a consultation on ‘safeguarding’ policies involving 100 children and young people from the age of 10 upwards with different levels of experience of custody, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner. Ex-offenders who had considerable experience of the youth justice system

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carried out the research: our facilitators have turned their lives around and are all fully trained to run consultation groups. Their past gives them a special understanding and rapport with children and young people, which encourages participants to talk openly, often for the first time, about their feelings and experiences.

As part of another project with schools, User Voice organised for a group of 10 young people who had contact with the criminal justice system, representative of thousands like them who will leave school with little hope and no prospects, to attend a roundtable discussion with politicians and senior civil servants at the Cabinet Office.

**RYAN**

It took for the courts to step in – give me a caution and three months referral order — before they actually realised that maybe there [was something that they could do]. That wasn’t helpful: it put a lot of stress on my family and myself but unfortunately that’s the way our system is at the moment.

My first caution was for assault against a family member. I regret it now, but at the time I had a lot of anger and mental health problems that hadn’t been recognised and it took something as serious as that before something happened. I was remanded into the care of social services for three months. Before I got remanded, I had a social worker: quite a nice person, who supported my family, got my family some group therapy, referred our case to child and mental health services: absolutely brilliant. During my remand I had a different social worker, who didn’t seem like he knew what he was doing: he was quite new to the job.

At the time of my referral I was still on anti-depressants. I got put in a B&B away from all the support that I needed. The people that run the house weren’t doing a very good job. How can you expect a young person with depression and self-harm tendencies to be put alone for most of the night when they are on anti-depressants? The man who owned the place didn’t really care and he’s only really in it for the money. When the house manager is struggling, there’s no one for them to turn to. I don’t understand how they can have a licence for that. I was moved there in case I re-offend, but I’m getting no support and no one would know if I did reoffend. That’s not what the courts have asked for.

I was shocked: I hadn’t been in care before. To be at home and then one day to be moved out of there with no support. I saw my family once every two weeks because social services paid for their train fare. They did that for up to a month after my eighteenth birthday. They were always good like that. I actually asked my social worker on several occasions, but it was always: ‘We’ll talk about it on Monday, Ryan’. ‘You’re just over reacting, Ryan.’ ‘We haven’t got anywhere else at the moment, Ryan’. They just kept putting it off.

Mental health services, social services, all the services from my school. All of them in one way, shape or form have failed me. And I know there are 1000’s of people out there who have been failed by those services. They’ve let so many people down. If people that have been let down by social services were given a voice, the whole system would have to be radically changed because so many people have been let down.
YOUTH CRIME IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. The UK has high rates of youth crime and more young people in custody than any other European country (besides Turkey).¹ The number of recorded offences committed by those under 18 in 2007/8 was 277,986.² The past 15 years have seen more young people drawn into the youth justice system, however, the year to November 2009 saw a 21.6% reduction in first time entrants to the criminal justice system³.

According to the MoJ the proven rate of reoffending for juvenile offenders within a year of sentencing is 37%.⁴ Its statistics show that reoffending rates range widely between prisons and that those who have served a short-term sentence reoffend at a higher rate. The cost of keeping a young person in a young offenders institution was £34,000 in 2008/9.⁵ The cost of dealing with young offenders to the criminal justice services 2008/9 was £4 billion a year.⁶

Poverty and social disadvantage are closely related to offending.⁷ They are strongly related to whether young people become entangled in the criminal justice system and to getting caught. Once warned or charged young people are more likely to be arrested again than those who commit similar offences, but were unknown to the police.⁸

25% of boys and 40% of girls in custody say they have experienced violence at home.⁹ Of prisoners aged 16-20, around 85% show signs of a personality disorder, 10% of a psychotic illness. In 2007, there were over 1,000 self-harm incidents among 15 to 17 year olds.¹⁰ Boys in prison aged 15-17 are 18 times more likely to kill themselves than in the community: 30 children have died in custody since 1990.¹¹

⁵ Hansard, 2 March 2010.
⁹ Cites the Youth Justice Board. http://www.madeleinemoonmp.com/53610db7-61b1-4b14-6524-5244d482ac88
¹¹ Ibid
Mental health
- One in ten children aged five to 16 has a clinically diagnosable mental health problem.\textsuperscript{12} Nearly 80,000 children and young people suffer from severe depression.\textsuperscript{13}
- It is estimated that one in 12 children and young people deliberately self-harm.\textsuperscript{14} Suicide accounts for nearly a quarter of all deaths of young people aged between 14 and 25 years old.\textsuperscript{15}

Unemployment
- The number of 18 to 24-year-olds out of work for two years or more rose to 72,000 in the three months to June 2010, up 11\% on the previous quarter.
- The number of young people out of work for one year or more fell by 1.4\% in the three months to June 2010 compared to the previous quarter, to reach 184,000.\textsuperscript{16}

Homelessness
- Despite a fall in numbers in some parts of the UK, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that around 75,000 young people continue to be at risk and are in contact with homelessness services every year. This includes at 31,000 who are not recognised as being statutorily homeless.
- The breakdown of family relationships has been identified as the main cause of youth homelessness, often following years of family conflict.

Drug and alcohol misuse
- In England in 2009 around 180,000 11 to 15 years olds were regular smokers, around 540,000 drank alcohol in the last week, and around 250,000 had taken drugs in the last month.\textsuperscript{17}
- Latest prices indicate a line of cocaine can work out at as cheap as £1, while an average price is somewhere between £2 and £4.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a household survey; The NHS Information Centre, 2009
\textsuperscript{15} Office for National Statistics, 2007, Mortality Statistics, Series DH2 no 30 + no 32.
\textsuperscript{16} ONS Nov 2010
\textsuperscript{17} Smoking, drinking and drugs amongst young people in England in 2009. The NHS Information Centre 2009.
\textsuperscript{18} Home Affairs Select Committee (2010). The Cocaine Trade. London: House of Commons
### CONTEXT

“I think people want their politicians to ask the question: ‘what is it that brought that young person to commit that crime at that time? What’s the background to it, what are the long-term causes of crime?’... Let’s try and understand what’s gone wrong in these children’s lives .... Let’s now deal with those problems.”

DAVID CAMERON, JULY 2006

As newly elected leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron was mocked for his ‘hug a hoodie’ speech. Should we need one, this serves as a reminder that there is little political capital to be gained from trying to insert more commonsense into the public debate about crime. But that was then and this is now. In this section we attempt to sketch the broader landscape within which our work takes place.

While there have been some recent reductions, youth offending and re-offending in the UK remains high. Perhaps more importantly, the perception of youth crime is distorted with many believing young people are responsible for the majority of offences. This is not surprising. Although we now face tough economic times, despite relative economic stability over the longer term research suggests that young people living in Britain are facing and causing particular problems in their communities.

In 2007 a UNICEF report concluded that the UK was one of the worst of the world’s wealthier nations in which to be young. It concluded that Britain’s children and young people had the worst relationships with their family and peers, suffered more from poverty and indulged in more ‘binge drinking’ and hazardous sex than those in other wealthy nations. Meanwhile a Prince’s Trust survey published in 2008, found widespread fear and dislike of young people among 2,488 adults across the UK.

3 Speech at the Centre for Social Justice, 10 July 2006. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5166498.stm
**The Big Society**

“From schools to the NHS, policing and prisons, we have developed a clear plan for modernisation based on a common approach. A Big Society approach, which empowers not only services users, but professionals that strengthens not only existing providers, but new ones in the private and voluntary sectors too.”

DAVID CAMERON, JANUARY 2011

It is too early to tell for how long the Big Society will remain the core narrative of the government, or indeed how broadly it is supported amongst ministers serving in the Coalition. However cynical we may be about its depth and implications for state spending, there is in the idea – that people need to ‘step up’ and do more to engage in local services and solve issues facing their communities – some resonance for organisations like User Voice; not least because the government is looking increasingly to the voluntary sector to engage the public and to modernise public services.

Once more, many of the core ideas implicit in the Big Society agenda – a stronger role for civic society, an emphasis on involving service users more effectively in the delivery of public services, for example – are ones that the main political parties, including Labour in government, had developed over some years.

Yet, in reality, many public services and charities still offer people very little choice and input on how they receive help. Much of the time, the mechanisms by which service users can make their voices heard remain weak and consultation is too often done in a tokenistic way. In responding to this challenge, it is essential we find ways of reaching excluded groups of children and young people, but to do so in a more searching way, using people who have had similar life experiences, in order to gather the best possible information to create more effective interventions. This needs to be built on the evidence that does exist on which interventions have the greatest impact on offending levels.8

The time is ripe for a new look at the problem of youth offending: the reduction in public spending on a range of services makes value for money and efficiency ever more important. User Voice does not pretend to have the answers. However, we are clear that increasing the effectiveness of current youth offending services requires us to develop new ways of engaging excluded young people.

Our work is informed by Sherry Arnstein’s classic model of engagement (Figure 2).9 This ladder of participation does not necessarily reflect a hierarchy: good practice on user engagement stresses the need to be on the right rung for the right job. This is important for when we come

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7 Prime Minister’s speech on modern public service, RSA, 17 January 2011.
to think more about excluded young people and what our aims are: exchange information and allow feedback? Or are we looking for a deeper level of involvement? What and whose agenda is being served? What is clear is that honesty and clarity about purpose and process from the outset are critical.

Figure 2: A Ladder of Citizen Participation.

Breaking the cycle

The government’s emphasis on localisation, citizen engagement and payment by results has implications for the criminal justice system.10 This represents a fundamental change from using centrally planned and standardized interventions, delivered to meet national key performance targets. It remains to be seen whether the government can achieve the changes it desires while making cuts to criminal justice and youth services or what new approaches will be needed to secure value for money and better outcomes.

The prison population has dramatically increased in the last decade or so: when Labour came to power in May 1997 the prison population was just over 60,000. At the time of the 2010 general election it had risen to just under 85,000. While overall crime has reduced over this period, levels of reoffending, particularly amongst young people, remain persistently high.11 The election of a new government and the need for cuts to public spending – combined with a sense that the UK system is outdated and not working – is opening up a debate about the future of criminal justice policy.

The Justice Minister Kenneth Clarke has stressed the need to reduce the prison population: a pressing need given the proposed closure of three prisons and the suspension of Labour’s estate expansion. It could be argued that what is proposed in *Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders*. MoJ December 2010.


Cycle, the government’s Green Paper on criminal justice, shows the influence of coalition working. However, before the general election the Conservatives promised a ‘rehabilitation revolution’ and much of the emphasis of this early thinking is echoed in current proposals, including the need to tackle persistent reoffending amongst those people who serve repeated short sentences.12

At the same time, public sector cuts are resulting in a reduction to the MoJ budget, including that of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which is being restructured. The Youth Justice Board is to be scrapped and the government aims to speed up the deportation of foreign nationals who offend, make further cuts to the legal aid budget and reduce the number of courts.

The Coalition wants to give police greater freedom from ministerial control and paperwork at the same time as increasing accountability to the public. Meanwhile, it says it will give people greater legal protection to prevent crime, and implement the Prisoners’ Earnings Act; to allow deductions from prisoners’ earnings for properly paid work to be channeled to victims. The government has announced a review of sentencing policy with an aim to introduce more consistency and maximum and minimum sentences linked to behaviour. Alongside a new drugs strategy, the government has emphasised the need for sentencing to be consistent with tackling drug and alcohol dependency and helping offenders get clean.13

**Engaging young people**

The MoJ has made welcome moves in the area of offender engagement, including instituting a review of peer mentoring schemes and current practice in the secure estate. However, in general, there remains little debate about the role of offenders themselves in helping shape interventions, or indeed the legislation itself. What place do current and ex-offenders have within the criminal justice system in terms of engagement and more ambitiously, co-design and co-production of services?

For many vulnerable young people, their interactions with statutory services, such as education, social services, healthcare, and the criminal justice system, shape their childhood experiences, and to some significant degree, their outlook on life. Yet despite some progress, young offenders are rarely given the opportunity to feed their thoughts back to those in power and to shape the policies and services that have such a fundamental effect on their lives. They are rarely seen as a source of ideas and innovation. This leads to further exclusion: the risk is that alienation contributes to acts of anti-social behaviour, violence and criminality.

Engagement needs to go beyond practitioners and academics asking

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young people what they think: consultation needs to be designed with young people, and involve them speaking and nominating peers to speak on their behalf. It needs to reach the least compliant and most chaotic, and include both support and challenge. To this end, we propose that asking ex-offenders to engage with young people involved in crime is no better place to start.

RYAN

Two of the youth offender teams that I’ve been involved with have been incredible. I haven’t got a bad word to say about them. I done my three-month referral with one team and I done my last two month of my detention training with the other. They’ve been really supportive: helped me sort out accommodation, finance and medical.

One other though, not so much. They done my pre-sentencing report down there and when they were writing that it was almost like they were part of the police trying to re-question me. And I didn’t feel like that was their job; they were almost trying to put words in my mouth to make it seem, make my offence, which was already pretty bad, seem worse than it was. I had two YOT workers down there – male and female – I didn’t feel like I could connect with them at all. There was no way I could go to them if I had a problem at the time. They were very standoffish, they were very judgmental.

I spent my six months at a YOI in Kent: it’s a nice enough prison. When I first went there from being sentenced, the staff down there were really supportive. They made sure my mum knew where I was going. There was no violence like there is in places. Within my first two weeks of being there I saw an altercation between three young people. It took five or ten minutes for everything to calm down. I know they’ve been trained to do their job, but sometimes its just not physically possible.

I think there needs to be more staff, especially in the education block and especially between movements. I just don’t think there’s enough staff on the scene. The education staff there are brilliant. When I left school I had 2 grade C GCSE’s and when I came out I had brought my English up from F to a level 2 and I’ve got my Health & Safety at work. I’ve been on an art course as well.

When I left there was a lot of building work going on. They’ve spent millions of pounds tearing buildings down to rebuild them and that, to me is millions of pounds down the drain, which could have been used in hospitals and schools. It’s ridiculous.

I think there need to be a lot more staff in the correct places. A lot of staff during education times, they are doing their paperwork. If there’s been an incident that they’ve been a witness to, they have to fill out a report. If they’ve heard a bit of bad language, they have to fill out a report. They need to have more time in the correct places, in the education block, in between movements, so they’re not always worried about their paperwork.
THE PROJECT

The Excluded Youth project is the latest in a series of ex-offender led consultations undertaken by User Voice and is its largest to date. It has three objectives. First, to undertake a major user-led consultation with young people, about their experiences, youth justice services and the causes of youth crime. Second, to make sure that the views and voices of these young people are captured and shared with practitioners and policy makers. The third objective – to be met in the next stage – is to work with peer-nominated participants to develop some of the young people’s ideas.

Three broad questions underpinned our consultation design:

- What factors do young people identify as triggering their offending behaviour and entry into the criminal justice system?
- What is the impact and experience of youth justice services from young people’s perspectives? What works, what doesn’t and why?
- What could have been done to avoid them getting into trouble and what solutions can young people suggest to prevent re-offending?

Methods

Between June and November 2010, User Voice engaged with over 600 young people. The key criteria for inclusion were: young people aged 12-27 with previous or current experience of criminal justice services or those at risk of offending. This was done through (see Table 1):

- A user designed survey where questionnaires were filled in by 582 young people.
- 22 discussion groups led by User Voice facilitators and involving 325 young people in: the South West, London/South East, the Midlands, the North East and the North West.

“Everyone’s got a temper in my family. Due to my mum, her and my brothers have all been arrested. It’s like she’s passed it down to us. We’ve all got a temper, anger.

KIM, SOUTH EAST

“When something happened in my family, it sent me off the rails and then I started drinking and that led to everything.

GRANT, SOUTH EAST
• One-to-one interviews and engagement through the project’s Facebook page.
• Three workshops in Manchester, London and Birmingham where young people were able to record their own lyrics on their experiences.
• Rap artist Speech Debelle held three workshops with young people to hear about their personal experiences and translate these to the public through music.
• User Voice facilitators involved in the consultation kept diaries to capture observations about the levels of participation, group dynamics and other factors that may help in future projects.
• 30 young people were nominated throughout this process by their peers to attend a policy discussion forum in Westminster attended by 25 policy makers and senior representatives of NOMS, the Youth Justice Board, probation and MPs.

Critically, throughout the project, User Voice has provided support to the young people involved. Those attending the policy discussion forum were given a range of skills training and support including in public speaking. The aim of the forum was to share the broad findings of the project to date and to work on solutions together, giving policy makers and young people a rare chance to communicate directly.

Participants

User Voice has used the term ‘excluded youth’ throughout this project. We understand this is open to interpretation and of the risks of stigmatising young people. This is not our intention: we are fully aware of the diversity of this group and individual uniqueness and differences. We use the term to try to capture a series of characteristics that these young people share in terms of their experiences and circumstances.

The young people involved in this project have had some direct experience of the criminal justice system. Some have spent time in prison, a young offenders institution or a secure children’s home (or a combination of these). Many have been charged and subject to a range of sentences. The consultation combined self-selection and young people’s nominations and set out to reach those who were not the most compliant.

In total 582 young people filled in the questionnaires. Some 534 told us how old they were and of these: 19 were between the ages of 12 and 14; 202 were aged 15 to 17 (38%); 290 (54%) were aged 18 to 24 and 23 were aged 25 to 27. Of those who specified their gender (550), 450 (82%) were male and 100 were female. This is reflective of the broader make up of the secure estate.

A total of 542 people filled in the information about ethnicity: 333 (61%) are white and 209 (39%) are from black and ethnic minority groups of which 118 (22%) described themselves as black, 64 (12%) said dual heritage/mixed race, 24 (4%) said Asian and 3 (1%) said

—I come from a strong Muslim background in Scotland. People telling me no all the time made me curious as to why they are saying no without giving me a reason. So curiosity led me to leave my house, using drugs, stealing. It wasn’t too deep and I was put into a hostel, with a bunch of people that were on the next level. There was bare heroin use; there was bare stabbing, stuff like that. I was harmless, I would steal food, steal stuff in shops and smoke a bit of weed, I’d party and that but nothing violent, so I got put into a different route. I left that stage and went deeper- pushing heavier drugs, messing people up in the face, stuff like that.

ASH, SOUTH EAST
Chinese/other. Again this is broadly in line with the national profile of young offenders.

A total of 504 participants answered the question about disability with 38 (8%) saying they had a disability. Asked about mental health, 96 of the total 582 participants (16%) said they had experienced mental health problems.

Taking into account that 68 of the 582 participants who could not be categorized in terms of where they lived, for example because they were interviewed in custody, of the rest (514) over a third (184) were living in London, 112 (22%) in the North West, 84 (16%) in the South West, 50 (10%) in the South East, 46 (9%) in the Midlands and 38 (7%) in the North East.

### Table 1: User Voice’s Excluded Youth Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young people nominate participants in regional discussion groups.</th>
<th>User Voice facilitates, trains and supports 325 young people to take part in regional discussion groups:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North East (39)</td>
<td>3 x Newcastle (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West (28)</td>
<td>Lancaster (10) Liverpool (8) Manchester (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands (52)</td>
<td>Birmingham (18) Coventry (20) Nottingham (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London/South East (82)</td>
<td>2 x Brighton (31) Forest Gate (8) Hackney (7) HMYOI Reading (11) Islington (9) Reading (7) South London (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West (124)</td>
<td>Bournemouth (14) Bristol (12) Dorset (15) HMYOI Ashfield, Bristol (60) HMYOI Portland, Dorset (23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young people attending forums nominate 30 peers to attend policy discussion.</th>
<th>User Voice provides support, personal development and speaker training.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young people engage through Facebook, and through music workshops where they rap and write about their experiences. London (10) Birmingham (12) Manchester (10)</td>
<td>30 young people and 25 policy makers and representatives from the criminal justice services discuss responses to youth crime and develop ideas for solutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ethics and principles

Throughout the Excluded Youth project User Voice’s aim has been to help young people overcome their fears about sharing, provide clear reasons for engaging and ensure their safety. Trust building, making connections through sharing appropriately and creating rapport are central to removing barriers to engaging hard to reach groups. As well as all being ex-offenders (experts through experience) our integrated professional skills included:
After I stabbed a guy yeah, I thought I was mad myself because I went to my friends house and fell asleep, and when I woke up I thought no, there’s something really wrong with me, but what I realised was that I was living a lie in a way because every day I was waking up saying: I am cool, I am cool but I was hurting inside, hurting. The littlest thing was the trigger because the fuse had been taken out over so many years of abuse.

STEVEN, SOUTH EAST

- Extensive community work and development with young and vulnerable groups;
- Professional health and social care experience, research and service management; and
- Professional counselling, psycho-therapeutic and group facilitation skills.

The sensitive nature of this consultation demanded a robust set of ethical principles. User Voice has developed these through several consultation projects with young people. They underpin our work alongside our existing safeguarding policies and include making it clear to young people they can cease to be involved at any time without reason or recourse.

In the next sections we summarise the results of our survey alongside the outcome of the 22 discussion groups. As in any exercise on this scale and with this particular group, there will be some margin of error and some survey questions unanswered, particularly when they are of a sensitive nature: we have indicated how many people answered each question. In general, very similar issues and figures came out of each region.

As far as we are aware, this consultation is unique in England in combining a user-led approach on this scale, with this group, across nation wide geographic locations. The combination of survey work and deeper qualitative approaches has enabled us to gather both ‘hard’ data, while unearthing ‘softer’ rich and in-depth accounts of young people’s first hand experiences. We argue that these processes put together – in particular the involvement of ex-offenders whom young people could relate to, trust and be challenged by – reveal different levels of ‘truths’ and expose the risk of misdiagnoses in consultation.

RYAN

So, I’ve been on both sides of the police. When I’ve been arrested, the officers there have been incredibly supportive and very nice, and made sure that everything’s understood. But there are occasions when I’ve been in questioning and they’re almost trying to trip me up on words. I think they can be quite forceful with their questions: almost intimidating. If you’re going to interview someone to try and get the truth out of them, they’re going to tell you whatever you want just to make sure that they stop being intimidated and for me, that isn’t the right way to go about it. You’re not gonna get the truth.

The police aren’t my favourite people, but most of the time they do a very good job. They helped my family when we were in trouble. During my previous offence, I got a 12-month detention and training order, prior to that I was remanded into the care of local authority for three months, so I got moved away from my home. During those three months there were a number of attacks on my house: walls being smashed, windows being kicked in, threatening letters sent to my house. The police were able, on several occasions, to come out within five minutes, have a helicopter and search dogs to help find the perpetrators and they fit a personal alarm into my mum’s house so that she felt safe. Knowing that they were looked after was an incredible relief.
CAUSES OF CRIME

Here we go into some detail about our findings. As well as the survey results summarised here, we have drawn from the 22 discussion forums over half (325) of survey participants went on to engage in. Both as we shall see, make depressing reading.

In the discussion forums, many participants reported very difficult issues around family including crime and parenting. The majority of survey participants however said they had a happy home life. The most common causes of crime identified by those young people (494) who responded to this question in our survey and who gave a sole cause were drugs and/or alcohol and peers (both 19%). A further 12% said money and 41 (8%) cited boredom. However, in discussion it is clear that boredom – while a real issue in relation to offending – was often shorthand for other, much more profound issues such as anger, repeated rejection and the consequences of drug use or mental health problems.

Family life
We shall return to these issues shortly but first look in more detail at the young people’s background. A total of 563 people answered the question about where they lived when they were growing up (see Table 2). We need to be cautious here not to make too many assumptions about what constitutes a stable family life, while not ignoring the evidence from the young people, many of whom had experienced upheaval.

In total 380 (65%) of respondents said they had a happy home life, while 202 (35%) said no or did not answer. The latter group was significantly less likely to have attended school regularly (38% compared to 63% of those who said they had a happy home life). They were more likely to have had a problem with drink or drugs when they got into trouble (57% compared to 38%) and more likely to have ever been excluded from school (75% compared to 69%).

Again we need to be careful not to draw too many conclusions here as these experiences themselves can exacerbate family tensions. A total
If you grow up in care or on a council estate and no one gives a fuck about you and no one is showing you the right path, you find other ways. You are pissed off and see all these rich kids with their nice clothes and their Gucci and you just want to kick the fuck out of them. They are privileged; they are going to be going to Oxford, Cambridge driving a Mercedes when they are 17. When you are wearing second hand clothes from a boot sale with holes in the jeans and you just want your own clothes, your own money.

DAVID, SOUTH EAST

Of 100 (17%) of participants had been in care at some stage. A fifth had been through some kind of upheaval in their living arrangements. A small number (2%) had grown up only in a children’s home or in foster care. It is striking that less than a third (27%) of participants had only experienced living with both their parents when they were growing up and that nearly one in 10 (over 9%) had never lived with either parent when growing up.

In discussion the issue of role models (and negative or violent media) was raised repeatedly in all regions. Young people talked about the role models they believed they needed but lacked and, for many, this was a missing father figure. Many cited good, caring parenting as critical in preventing crime and some – even where they had good relationships with parents – gave examples of generational offending behaviour.

The vast majority of participants were from poor families and lived in deprived areas. Many believed that had they had wealthier parents or lived in a different area, they would have been less likely to commit crime. The desire for goods and lack of money was cited repeatedly as a contributing factor to getting into trouble and not being able to get out of it again.

Participants were asked to indicate their living arrangements in relation to family at different stages in their life (Table 2). Many experienced a range. The percentages above relate to answers where young people indicated this was their sole experience with the exception of the 20% who experienced a combination.

Table 2: Where participants lived when growing up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of responses: 563</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One parent at some stage</td>
<td>339</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent and nothing else</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents at some stage</td>
<td>202</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents and nothing else</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another relative at some stage</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another relative and nothing else</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parents at some stage</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parents and nothing else</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s home at some stage</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s home and nothing else</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other place at some stage</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other and nothing else</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A combination of the above</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sentencing
All but 8% (48) of the young people we spoke to had received a sentence of one kind or another: not surprisingly the most common action to be mentioned.

"If we had people to give us the right guidance and show us the better ways of doing things. If my mum and dad had stayed together and showed me some love and care, everyone I knew were fighting, drinking and selling drugs, no one went to work.

DANIEL, SOUTH WEST"
in relation to sentencing were cautions, reprimands and warnings from the police with 440 (over three quarters) of participants having experienced this. Around a third had been given a detention and training order or detention to a young offenders institution. A fifth of the participants had received 10 or more different types of sentence (Figure 3). One had received 16 types of sentence.

‘Misdiagnosis’
In some ways our survey data confirms much of what we already know: there is a strong relationship between drugs and alcohol and offending; that peer pressure is significant to young people getting into trouble, and that young people cite boredom and lack of money as significant drivers in them first committing crime.

It could be tempting to conclude that we can therefore develop a hierarchy of immediate ‘drivers’ behind these young people’s early involvement in crime. However, closer examination of the survey and the material arising from interviews and discussions shows we need to be cautious about rushing to policy solutions on the basis of what can be young people’s ‘shorthand’ for communicating a myriad of other problems which may require much more profound action.

When we do this, we find that boredom was mentioned by 70 people either as a sole reason (41) or in combination with other reasons (29). Of those who cited boredom as the sole reason they got into trouble, over half went on to state that they had a problem with drink or drugs at the time they got into trouble.

In talking to young people, boredom is consistently linked with not having money, with isolation, their exclusion from school and other mainstream institutions. We would not want to suggest that there is not a need for facilities for excluded young people (there is). However – as the policy forum discussions confirm – this cannot be a substitute for addressing the far deeper problems from which these young people suffer and bring to bear on others. At a time when youth services are seeing cut backs, we do not underestimate the importance of keeping young people active in this context. Our point is that in setting

When you’re doing serious crimes, like burglaries, you’re looking at three or four years. If you do a street robbery, that’s like half your teens down the drain. It’s better to get involved in like buying and selling, it doesn’t even have to be illegal, it’s not just the people you are hurting when you burgle a house, it’s your family? If you’re gonna do something don’t do something where you’re looking at nine years.
MAL, NORTH WEST

“ So it’s about your habitat. If you’re in a negative habitat, in a place where people feel sad about themselves, if people feel sad about themselves then misery needs company. I want someone else to feel how I feel, you see what I am saying, that’s basics, misery does need company. It’s true.
LIAM, SOUTH WEST
priorities and designing interventions, we need to hear what young people are telling us underlies their inactivity and responses: inequality, desensitisation and on many occasions, high levels of anger and trauma.

The survey data gives us a valuable snapshot of young people’s experience, their diagnosis of the causes of their offending and opinions of the services they have received. However, face-to-face engagement with people who have ‘walked in their shoes’ begins to give a much richer account.

It is patently clear from both the profile of participants’ home lives and the discussions we subsequently had, that many of them had very difficult and disrupted relationships at home. Despite this, in survey responses very few young people (1%) cited family issues as a reason for them getting into trouble. Yet, in face-to-face discussions with ex-offenders, most of the young people revealed their family relationships as highly significant in shaping their behaviour: what is touching is how little young people tend to lay blame on parents or dysfunctional home life. They save most of their anger for themselves and for the agencies that have failed them.

What is tragic is that so many can now identify problems emerging early on and – as we shall see – articulate the type of help that they think they needed in terms of ‘recovering’ from early trauma and family dysfunction, including the emotional development they feel they needed but did not get.

**Things were not right at home. I was getting picked on by my step-dad. You have abuse happen to you and it doesn’t feel like it was dealt with and you want to rebel in order to get away from the feeling.**

CHLOE, SOUTH EAST

“Things were not right at home. I was getting picked on by my step-dad. You have abuse happen to you and it doesn’t feel like it was dealt with and you want to rebel in order to get away from the feeling.”

**RYAN**

I’ve been on housing benefit for a couple of months. Most of my rent is paid for. The way they’re paying it is ridiculous. At the moment it’s being paid into my account fortnightly, when my rent is paid monthly. I’ve even asked them to pay it straight into my landlord’s account but because the government’s had a brainwave which says that you should pay your landlord direct so that you can get used to that. Most teenagers, if they’ve got that amount of money in their bank – and yes, they know its for the rent, but most of them won’t care – its trainers, its clothes, its CDs. Some care leavers have had drug or alcohol dependency and they might take that and blow it and might end up killing themselves.

Connexions helped – they got me anger management courses, which was really useful. I’ve had three different Connexions workers. All of them have been fantastic. Because colleges won’t accept me at the moment because of my failed GCSE’s, they’ve helped me out. They’ve got me on a Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

They’ve helped me with finances, they’ve helped me with job searches, they’ve helped me with the lot they’ve been brilliant. When I got asked to leave my support accommodation in Portsmouth, my social worker found me somewhere to help with support: they’ve been fantastic. I can now easily do a weekly food shop for myself. I now know where to go and what to get. The support emotionally and for my education has been brilliant.

I think some housing agencies need to have inspections a bit more, maybe from the police or social services. I was meant to be having early release, and two weeks before that the governor of the prison said alright we can give Ryan his early release if he has a place to live. Social Services kept backlogging that so much I actually lost my early. Even though my solicitor at the time in five different counties found nine different places to stay, but social services said they couldn’t find any.
EXPERIENCE OF SERVICES

The young people we talked to are capable of giving praise and identifying what worked for them. However, in general the survey data presented here represents a failure in criminal justice services and raises major questions about the way in which they intervene in young people’s lives.

Those people who work with User Voice know better than most how difficult it can be for service interventions to work. The young people involved with this project do not pretend that delivering effective interventions is either straightforward or easy: when asked what could have been done or who could have acted differently to deliver better outcomes, they do identify themselves. Indeed, when asked what could have been done to prevent them offending, too many of the young people believed the answer was ‘nothing’.

We set out to ensure that we could engage with some of the most excluded people whose lives will often be chaotic and behaviour most destructive to themselves and others. If we are not to fail these young people, their families, communities and the public, policy makers and practitioners need to firmly reject that fatalistic ‘nothing’. They need to engage the hardest to hear in becoming part of the solution to improving services, rebuilding their lives and reducing offending.

In this section we shall examine these issues further, drawing out the themes that came across strongly in our 22 discussion groups and individual interviews with young people. In particular we focus on some of the changes that the young people here began to identify.

Education

All respondents answered some or all of the questions about education. We also asked participants to identify qualifications and exams they had secured (Table 3). Of the 495 young people who answered this
My school’s strict. I don’t bother going school. I’m trying to change because it’s the beginning of the year. My mum is ill and she’s not the same as she used to be so she’s laid back.

DANNY, MIDLANDS

question, 39% said they had not secured any. Half (51%) had secured GCSEs or above, 5% A-Levels, 2% other qualifications (including BTEC and City and Guilds), while less than 1% had a degree. A staggering 415 (71%) had been excluded from school. A total of 174 (30%) young people had been tested at some stage for learning difficulties. Of these 42 were diagnosed as dyslexic, 17 were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder and five as having both.

Participants were asked about when they got into trouble and 542 responded to this question: over half (304) had already been in trouble when at school and almost half (253) were unemployed when they got into trouble.

Table 3: What qualifications or exams participants secured (495 responses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Blank</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>GCSE</th>
<th>A or AS level</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Other (BTEC, City &amp; Guilds, OCR National)</th>
<th>Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>&lt; 16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>16 – 18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>232</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vast majority of young people described bad experiences at school. Exclusion featured strongly and many felt that the teachers had bad attitudes towards them. There was a consensus among many that they didn’t like school: it was seen as a place where they got into trouble, as boring or too strict and many felt they weren’t listened to. Only one participant said he enjoyed school.

Many of the young people recognised how difficult they could be to help: around a half of the total (315) said they attended school regularly. When asked what their school could have done to prevent them offending 377 answered and 106 (28%) did not think their school could have done anything. Just under a third (31%) of all respondents said they had received help for problems of behaviour or attendance at school. The rest either said they did not get help or did not answer.

In terms of changes they would like to see, the most common response was ‘support’ (22%), with all other responses scoring fairly consistently and low. What came through in both survey and face-to-face discussions was the desire to have been listened to and having more support in finding out what they were good at. Many identified particular issues that had arisen at school to do with learning or bullying (or both) which they felt were not dealt with effectively.

I agree cause I was a little shit and a teacher told me you’ll never make it in life and I did, I saw him about 1 month ago and told him about what I was doing and had done and I see his face, he looked shocked. I just remember him saying I’d be nothing.

KATY, SOUTH WEST
Social Services

However chaotic family life was for some of these young people, they were often reticent to criticise their parents. When it came to solutions and thinking about what could have been done to prevent them getting into trouble, many identified specific times in their earlier lives when they felt they needed help from outside the home but did not or could not access this. This ranged from having a trusted adult outside the family to talk about things that were happening at home, to therapeutic support to deal with neglect and or abuse.

Strong angry feelings emerged when social services were discussed with many young people describing their experiences as disempowering and/or pointless. Rather than seeing social services as having a supportive function, many of the young people associated their involvement with feeling threatened, coerced and with psychological devastation. In particular, some had either experienced being removed from their families and homes without sufficient explanation or choice or feared this happening. Some reported high levels of stress about having to attend case conference meetings.

In terms of changes they would like to see, participants raised a range of issues about the attitude of social workers and how this could be changed in order to be more supportive and empowering. Again, what came through the discussions very strongly in every region was a plea to be listened to, respected and to be able to talk to people who had been through similar difficulties.

Employment

A total of 253 said they were unemployed when they have got into trouble. Of these, just over a third (35%) said they had received help with getting employment or training: indeed only a fifth of the total number of participants (114 out of 582) said they received help in this respect. Help came from a range of agencies including charities and statutory services. Although a relatively small sample, more than twice as many felt they had been helped by Connexions rather than YOTs, probation and social services put together.

None of the young people we talked to reported any positive or helpful experiences about Jobcentre Plus. They associated it with inadequate welfare benefits and poverty, being patronised and looked down on with the effect of feeling worthless. Some claimed that mistakes were frequently made and the process of signing on was too long. The issue of not being able to sign on until 18 was also raised.

Views about Connexions were more mixed, with some young people reporting positive experiences about their engagement including work on their CV, access to education courses and support from helpful staff. However, some felt that help wasn’t tailored to their needs and that they

“I would make it possible for young people to have access to a counsellor or some kind of therapist because a lot of my problems started from when I was a child and I saw things a young person should not. Do you know how many youths have been sexually abused? It seems like there is no one we can trust to talk about these things, it would help if we knew we could go to someone who would listen and not judge us.

KAMAL, SOUTH WEST

“I had a job and I didn’t declare I had a criminal record and I was working there for like four months and enjoying the work and working hard and all that. And they said you have to go because you haven’t declared it. I wasn’t robbing out of the till or doing anything wrong.

JACK, NORTH WEST
were being ‘forced’ rather than supported emerged as an issue. Other issues raised included unreliability and the absence of caring qualities in some staff.

When asked what they felt could have been done to help them gain employment, only 232 people responded. The most common response (17%) was to identify support from family (with applications, for example) and having someone to talk to. The next most common response (14%) was to have done more themselves.

Drug and alcohol services

Nearly a fifth (18%) of all respondents (105 out of 582, and not just the 259 who said they had drink/drug problems) said they received help in this area. The rest either said they didn’t get help or didn’t answer.

Some of the young people expressed positive experiences related to the process of having their awareness increased about the associated risks of drug use. Others reported being supported to get clean and make life changes. In contrast, some reported that there was an emphasis on highlighting the bad side of drugs without any opportunities to engage them in coming off drugs. Some reported that they were just ‘talked at’. Several highlighted that agencies were not geared up to engage people who were using cannabis.

In terms of improvements, again much of the focus was on better two-way engagement rather than being talked at and workshops were requested. They wanted to be listened to, for the service to be reliable and to offer effective support focused on cannabis use. Several thought that they needed access to people who they could relate to such as reformed drug users because existing staff didn’t possess sufficient insights through direct experience. When asked what could have been done to help, 221 answered: the common response was nothing (26%), the second (21%) was changes and choices they could have made themselves. Again support came in the top three (12%).

Police

The evidence that emerged indicates that the relationships between young people in contact with criminal justice services and the police could not be worse. While participants identified ‘good’ and ‘bad’ police, in general of all agencies we explored, the police aroused the most anger and contempt.

Many felt that engagement with the police often meant being threatened and some said they had been violently assaulted.

According to these young people, they were being consistently stereotyped as criminals and regularly harassed, even when they felt they were not doing anything wrong. The majority said they were routinely treated as a form of social nuisance. Some also mentioned that police
would also threaten them ‘with social services’ if they did not cooperate with their inquiries.

When identifying changes they would like to see, participants identified action around improving dialogue and communication and building mutual respect and stressed that this must include tackling stereotyping, harassment and physical abuse.

**Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)**

Of all the agencies discussed, YOTs were generally seen as the most helpful, although experiences varied between individuals and YOTs themselves. Of the total, 347 had contact with a youth offending worker assigned to them. Of these 309 responded to the question about what the YOTs did that helped. Nearly a third (31%) said nothing, whereas 29% said they provided support and 11% said that the YOT helped keep them busy.

In discussion, those unsatisfied raised the issues of YOTs deciding they are in breach of their sentence too easily and engaging with staff who were unable to connect with or help them. When asked what more could have been done, the young people spread their answers fairly evenly but with 10% identifying more support being offered.

When asked what changes or improvements they would like to see young people suggested more flexibility, particularly on the issue of breaching orders and a greater range of meaningful options. Many suggested the need to improve trust, make improvements to how YOTs communicated with young people and the introduction of peer mentors who were ex-offenders.

**Young offenders’ institutions and prisons**

A total of 248 (43%) of participants had spent time in a young offenders’ institution or prison. Most of the young people held very negative views and saw these institutions as ‘lock ups’ without any support or opportunities for rehabilitation or progression.

Bullying and some traumatic and violent experiences were identified as an issue. Having people they felt comfortable relating to and initiatives that address bullying were also raised.

Prisons were seen by some of those involved as less violent than young offenders’ institutions. This may be in part because few of those involved had direct experience but they had a sense that prison was safer and that relationships between staff and prisoners were more respectful.

Nonetheless generally young people felt that prison does not work or would not work for them and that too many young people were being given custodial sentences for minor offences.

Over half those who answered (231) said custody had not done anything to help them to prevent re-offending, while 9% felt the shock

“**That’s like me, my mum was working nights and my father was not about. I was out at fifteen and didn’t have no-one to tell me nothing.**

**TRISHA, SOUTH EAST**

“**I was in my cell for swearing and I went in and he was like: ‘ha-ha you’re in the cell’ and wound me up. Then he carried on saying: ‘what you crying for, you want your mummy and daddy’? It was the first two weeks, and I’m going mad in the cell and he’s come in the cell, grabbed me and pinned me down by the throat to the bed. I booted him in the face.**

**PAUL, NORTH EAST**
was a deterrent, 9% felt education and training had helped and 7% thought behavioural courses worked for them. Five young people (2%) said they had come out worse. Of the 182 young people who responded to the question of what more could have been done, other than those who said nothing (59%), the most common answers were more resettlement intervention (9%) and education provision (8%).

"I've had six different probation workers in seven months. The one I'm with now I don't get on well with because she's arrogant. She said I'm not engaging in my appointments. She says: You don't open up. So I said to her, I get here, walk in the room, you say, how you been, I say yeah this has happened and that has happened and she says okay shut up; there's your next appointment, goodbye.

DIANE, NORTH EAST"

Probation Services

Over a third (36%) or 207, of the young people involved had a probation officer. Again people had mixed views. Some felt that probation services were helpful when it came to court appearances, securing housing, getting a job and getting hours extended on a tag. Of the 207, 180 answered the question about what probation services had done to help avoid further offending: over a third (36%) said nothing and 29% identified support given.

The young people who were unsatisfied gave a range of reasons that included: not being given enough time, probation services having too many people to engage with and being looked down on. In terms of changes and improvements young people asked for more leniency with recalls, changes to the system and the way staff work so that they had more time and greater consistency with one worker. One young person highlighted the need to be assertive when asking for his needs to be addressed. When it came to what could have been done, more support was again in the top two at 14%.

"This is the first place I have lived for four years. I was living at the airport. I ran away when I was sixteen and they didn't really bother about me. I wanted to be settled. I got a flat when I was sixteen when I left care, but I couldn't manage it, I lost control of it, I was just overwhelmed by it: before I knew it was out of control.

DARYL, NORTH EAST"

Housing

Of the total number of participants, 164 said they had housing problems at the time of getting in trouble. Of those, only 54% (89) said that they received housing help. Meanwhile, 18% of all respondents said they had received help, mostly from probation or YOT or social services.

Many of the criticisms about housing touched on shortage or inaccessibility of decent affordable accommodation, which was seen as critical for those leaving custody in resettling. Those young people who were or had experienced homelessness talked about feeling extremely vulnerable and at risk. When hostels were discussed they were often seen as dangerous places, giving examples of offending behaviour. Some of those involved did not feel they were taken seriously by housing agencies because of their age and experience as an offender. In terms of what could have been done, yet again support scored high (25%). Other suggestions were help with payment and accessing accommodation and the need for more housing.
Multi-agency

One of the things that characterises the group of young people we have been working with, and the criminal justice system itself is complexity. The young people we talked to often have multiple problems and need to access a wide range of services from different sectors. Of those involved in the User Voice survey, 16% had contact with at least three of the following: a young offender team, probation services, a young offenders institution or prison. Those between the ages of 18 to 24 were most likely to have multiple contacts (27%).

The conversations we had with the young people involved in the discussion groups resulted in some fulsome praise: for YOTs and probation services in particular. Some mentioned particular people who had been helpful in sorting out specific problems. However, they were also highly critical of these same services on occasion and of the many other agencies we explored. This was consistent in every region we went to.

While this report will not make easy reading for many agencies, it would come as no surprise if effective feedback – a characteristic of modern public services – was already taking place. When asked whether they had a chance to give feedback, nearly 60% said they had in relation to YOT(s) and probation, with just under a third saying that they did not. This figure was lower for prisons and young offenders’ institutions (40%) where 48% said they did not have a chance to give their views of services.

We have tried here to identify in broad terms the potential intervention points and different roles that a range of agencies could play in working with young people in trouble (both in their early years and later when they have entered the criminal justice system). Participants also identified concerns about fitting back into society and with their family when they had served their sentence.

Some talked animatedly about wanting to change. However, many did not know how to do this and said they ended up mixing with the same friends in the same places that they got into trouble with originally. The reality is that many of these young people’s life chances will be restricted and are at odds with them moving away from offending. There was amongst many of the young people a high degree of intelligence, resilience and determination. However, there was also a lot of fear, anger, deep sadness and fatalism.

As many of their answers and observations expose, far too many think the services that they have worked with failed them. But too often they do not seem to think they could do much better. *The danger is with such a publicly unpopular and challenging group is that we all begin to agree with them.*

Throughout this project the young people involved – the ‘hardest to reach’ – have shown that they can engage constructively. They can, given the right balance of information, challenge and support, begin to identify solutions as well as problems. In the final section of this report we try to bring together the overarching themes that came out of our deliberations over the last six months. We then outline some of the specific ideas that began to be developed during the policy discussion forum.

“When my mum went to prison it just messed everything up and the social services scared us, wanting to take us away. As if it would be good for us to be in care. That would have been worse but you know what, somebody should have helped our family, helped our dad.

SIMONE, MIDLANDS
RYAN

If I could go back and change all my offences so that I didn’t do them. If I could have got the attention [of children’s mental health services and GP when I needed it, and even the help from some groups in my school. If I’d had the support I needed from them at a young age, my life might have been completely different. I might not have offended, I might have dealt with my bullying better, I might been a better, more trustworthy person now. I could still live at home; I could be at college finishing my degree this year. I’m not going to use that as an excuse: I did my offences I know that they were wrong. But, if I had had the help I might have gone down a different path.

Then when I told them the reasons, they didn’t believe me, they just thought I was an attention seeking 15-year-old. I actually felt incredibly let down. I got to the stage where I just wasn’t talking anymore. I had become very secluded in school. I have very few friends because I didn’t talk to many people I basically became a very solitary person, which I still am today.

I’ve got traces of Asbergers; I’ve got early on-set anti-social behavioural disorder. If all of those had been picked up on earlier and I had been taught the skills to deal with that, then my outset could have been different. If the school had responded to mine and my family’s complaints about bullying, I would have been a much happier person in school. A lot of my offences are because people have pushed me to the extreme and I have snapped.

Even though I was one of, or one of the brightest male students in school – because of the bullying and skiving and then my offences, I only walked away with 2 C’s as GCSEs when they had lined me up for 11 A-B GCSEs. Which shows the extent that bullying can have. If the bullying had been dealt with and nipped in the bud straight away I’d have had more GCSEs and I wouldn’t be in the situation I am now.
HARD TO HEAR?

Perhaps inevitably this report has much to say about the problems that young people raised. However, we have not set out to accentuate the negative and have tried to reflect the more positive experiences shared with us, as well as the constructive engagement that took place. Some young people identified specific individuals and services whose interventions helped them in not reoffending: youth offending teams, some Connexions and probation services come to mind. This is to be welcomed and built on. In this final section we set out some of the ideas that came out of the project for doing just this.

The individuals involved in this project all have unique experiences. As a group they represent a relatively small percentage of the UK’s excluded youth. Sadly their experiences are not exceptional: they tell us something about the experiences of young people in the UK who share their profile and who account for a high percentage of youth crime.

Excavating and articulating the voices of some of England’s most marginalised young people has been a challenge. These voices are hard to hear. For some their message will sound like a loud call to action to improve our criminal justice responses and to redouble our efforts in addressing the problems that lie beneath youth exclusion. For others this report will read like a drawn out version of David Cameron’s ‘hug a hoodie’ speech.

User Voice’s position is clear. In taking these voices seriously, we do not need to deny young people’s accountability for their actions; those we worked with wanted to be given more responsibility in tackling these issues. But as the Prime Minister has said, in seeking solutions, we need to understand more about what drives people to offend.

Open Space

The policy discussion held at Westminster in December 2010 included young people from around the country, alongside policy makers and senior practitioners from across the criminal justice system. Mark

“I came here today and I knew no-one. But here we are sitting around in a circle and we are united.”
DISCUSSION FORUM PARTICIPANT

“They’re quite solution focused – it’s not just moaning and groaning, they’re really coming up with ideas for change. I’ve been really impressed by these young people who are prepared to stand up, tell their stories and come up with solutions. It’s so important to listen to young offenders and we don’t do enough of that in probation.”
HEATHER MUNRO, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE LONDON PROBATION TRUST
Johnson opened the session. He set out the context of discussions including our interim findings. This was followed by some of the young people from each region sharing their experiences and what they hoped to discuss.

User Voice used the Open Space method for holding meetings based on self-organisation. Open Space events focus on one central question. In this instance it was: How can we work together to reduce youth crime? Other than this, there is no set agenda. Instead participants, through a series of sessions facilitated by User Voice staff – and informed by young people’s earlier engagement in regional workshops – identified the key issues they wished to discuss. Throughout the day participants filtered what they choose to discuss through what Open Space calls ‘dot democracy’: voting on the issues and ideas they believe are most important.

The process is designed to encourage participation and equality of engagement and has been used in a range of contexts, in varying scales by large companies, local government and community activists. User Voice chose this route because the Open Source approach seemed appropriate in engaging this group, many of who are not used to traditional meetings. The process also appears to work well in the context of complex issues, where there are divergent perspectives and skills, and where tensions and conflicts are likely to arise.

Feedback from participants has been very positive. In particular, the informal nature of the day, with its flexible structure resulted in many direct one-to-one discussions, with the confidence of the young people growing throughout.

Housing and employment

The complexity of the issues at hand, the range of experiences and ages, meant that a lot of ground was covered and many suggestions made. We have tried here to reflect the overall themes that came out of the day and the specific ideas that received the most votes. In particular there were clear messages around increasing young people’s access to housing and employment as part of their rehabilitation.

Many of the young people had found themselves homeless and unable to access a secure home. Some were unable or unwilling to access hostels, which they felt were often unsuitable for young people.

- **Recommendation:** greater flexibility on hostel rules, more support and advice available within hostels in dealing with past experiences and in securing future housing.

Of the top five areas of concern, three concerned employment. There were three distinct areas identified as priorities. First, many identified problems in accessing/returning to education due to their previous

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**You’re constantly blown away with their insight, intelligence and sensitivity, which is at odds with how we tend to stereotype them. As decision makers we don’t expose ourselves enough to the views of the people who use our services. It’s very easy to isolate ourselves from the views of the people in the system and yet their experience is at least as, if not more, important.**

*John Drew, Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board*

14 For more information: www.openspaceworld.org
convictions. Second, participants almost universally agreed that the government was right in reviewing the Rehabilitation of Offenders’ Act: those who had not offended since their last sentence had found it hard to secure work due to a combination of lack of skills and education (most had been excluded from school). In particular they wanted to see measures which allow young people who had committed offences to be able to ‘wipe the slate clean’ if they had not offended for a period and their offence was not serious.

Finally, the majority of young people supported measures that would allow them to work as social workers and police officers: the two agencies that they were most critical of.

- **Recommendation**: the creation of a user led national employment agency specialising in helping ex-addicts and ex-offenders to secure work coupled with incentives for employers and education providers who take on ex-offenders. While there are some projects already providing these services, their coverage is limited and none of the young people involved here were aware of their existence. User Voice believes that in the current financial climate, expanding these kinds of services is critical and consistent with the government’s focus on work within prison and through the gate.

- **Recommendation**: User Voice hopes that the forthcoming green paper on justice service seeks to strike a better balance between risks and employment, with particular focus on giving young people a fresh start and on proportionality.

**Education and activities**

For many young people their behaviour first came to the attention of public agencies while at school. The majority had been excluded. For some, bullying at school was identified as a trigger for their destructive behaviour or for simply exiting the system and spending increased amounts of time on the streets. The young people suggested a range of improvements here including more consistent challenging of discrimination within schools around sexuality and ‘difference’, better preventative work in schools focused on consequences of offending including the engagement of ex-offenders who have paid the price.

- **Recommendation**: the high percentage of exclusion from schools was startling. While we do not pretend that these young people are not disruptive, schools can play a more proactive role in triggering discussions around what lies behind young people’s behaviour and explore the role that therapeutic support and the engagement of ex-offenders can play in tackling young people’s behaviour.

There was considerable disagreement amongst participants on this issue: these divisions were largely between young people. While many
other participants were concerned about the implications of government spending cuts on youth activity programmes, the young people differed in how important they felt youth facilities were and/or what kinds of provision was needed. One youth worker stressed that while there was a need for safe spaces for excluded young people to congregate, resources were wasted when lack of thought was given to purpose and what was needed.

The Open Space voting system did result in this area being nominated as a priority but the focus of discussion was on the need – particularly in the current financial climate – to be clearer about purpose and on value for money. With some dissenters, the majority emphasised the importance of four elements: physical exercise, co-design with young people, the involvement of ‘excluded groups’ (including ex-offenders) in staffing and the emphasis on providing a space where young people could share their problems with each other and staff.

Facing extensive reductions to their spending budgets, some local authorities have already announced cuts to youth activities. Our job here is not to lobby for particular spending priorities but we do believe that councils risk making relatively small savings that will result in increased pressures elsewhere.

- **Recommendation**: those local authorities diverting resources away from youth services should seek to engage excluded young people as a priority.

### Children of prisoners

A minority of the young people involved had parents who were or had been in prison or had children of their own. However, when it came to voting on priority recommendations, this area emerged as one of the top five chosen. The main discussion centred on keeping children informed and supported throughout the process, from arrest through to sentencing and eventual discharge.

According to Action for Prisoners’ Families 7% of children will see a parent imprisoned during their school years and about 160,000 children a year have a parent sent to custody. This is around two and a half times the number of children in care and over six times the number of children on the child protection register. In 2008, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child singled out the children of prisoners as one of the groups being failed by the UK government. The importance of supporting families affected by imprisonment is acknowledged in government policies, including those of NOMS. Despite this there is no statutory support for either children or adults affected by imprisonment.

Maintaining quality family contact has been shown to have a significant impact on successful resettlement and reducing reoffending and

15 ‘Outrage at £3 million cuts to Birmingham youth service,’ *Birmingham Mail* 19 January 2011.
16 http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk
increase the likelihood of employment on release. But there are also important child welfare reasons to improve the services to children whose parents go to prison.

• **Recommendation:** the government should as part of its focus on rehabilitation and review of sentencing, introduce a statutory duty for courts and other agencies working with them to ensure that children are involved and aware of sentencing procedure, that their views are listened to. When a parent receives a custodial sentence, this should trigger available support to children and young people including providing someone to talk to about both the emotional and practical implications. Throughout the sentence families should have one person they can link to and with whom they can raise issues around visits, support needs and planned resettlement. With the right training, support and checks, ex-offenders are well placed to provide this service.

**Drugs**

Again there was a diverse range of views on drugs and alcohol services and how to tackle substance misuse. For example, some of the young people involved were clear that their cannabis use had been much more of a problem than others (service providers and contemporaries) recognised, describing their use as an ‘addiction’. Others wanted to see cannabis legalised. At the same time, there was considerable appetite for tighter restrictions on marketing alcohol to young people and for raising the cost of alcohol. Likewise, when it came to treatment, the majority of young people who had experience of drug misuse seemed to prefer strategies that aimed for abstinence rather than replacement.

• **Recommendation:** the Department of Health, working with local agencies needs to develop drug intervention services and treatment specifically for young people.

**Abuse, violation and fear**

A theme that arose throughout this project – and which resulted in the most animated debate – was the extent to which young people had experienced abuse, violence and intimidation. For some these experiences were raised as being commonplace and entirely unremarkable. This came out particularly in relation to two issues.

The first was the extent to which the young people mentioned these experiences in relation to family and others – including gangs – within their community or school. A significant number of young people gave examples and expressed bewilderment and anger that nothing had been done when they had gone to adults for help or redress. This is consistent
with national evidence that shows offenders are more likely to have been victims of crime and violence.18

However intolerable home life was, many of the young people found it incredibly hard to blame or name the failures of their parents. The reasons for this are profound and complex and we do not pretend to have the explanations. However, what seems clear is that for some young people it is easier to focus on failure on the part of agencies or in themselves than face the reality of not having an alternative: preferable to focus on their own ‘badness’ than to reject the one unit they belonged to. Throughout our consultations, young people articulated their memories and perception of a transition from being ‘normal’, ‘OK’ or even ‘good’ children, to becoming an offender or ‘bad’: many felt thwarted by their attempts to reverse this process.

Underlying the behaviour of some of the most chaotic and aggressive young people there emerged a deep sense of powerlessness in relation to these events and to their ability to shape and change their lives. For many it was having been through circumstances as a child which most of us would find intolerable, without any recognition or therapeutic response.

According to the NSPCC, each year at least 55,000 victims of sex abuse face behavioural and mental health problems because they cannot access therapy. There is only one support programme for every 25,000 children in the UK and many areas have no therapeutic provision at all for abused children.19 It found that teenagers are especially likely to miss out on therapy because they are less able to access services for adults and may be considered too old for support on a child protection plan. This does not take into account the broader interventions needed to deal with other kinds of abuse and neglect.

• **Recommendation:** User Voice is developing proposals for a different approach aimed at reaching more children and young people. This will explore how we can offer those whose behaviour brings them to schools’ or other services’ attention with therapeutic support involving adults (including ex-offenders who have been through similar experiences). These would meet regularly and become a safe unit outside the home and offer the support, emotional care, and guidance needed to help them to develop and find coping strategies to deal with the misery and violence they have experienced.

**Police**

The second finding in this area was about young people’s view of the police and their experience of intimidation, fear and violence when in contact with secure services (often from other young people). Almost all showed a deep animosity towards the police by whom they felt victimised.

and stereotyped. A significant number talked of being assaulted or abused by police. Some of those involved, and in particular males, felt that they were stopped and searched when they were doing nothing wrong.

Violence came up in relation to prison, and in particular, young offenders’ institutions. If the services they have come into contact with are perceived to operate through intimidation, if young people experience high levels of violence at home and then in the secure estate, then it is perhaps not surprising that for some this behaviour has been normalised.

- **Recommendation**: however negative they were the young people involved in this project showed considerable interest in expanding the opportunities available for excluded young people and the police to work together in tackling local crime, in particular improving community relations, stop and search procedures and gang culture.

- **Recommendation**: visible measures to tackle police brutality and more accessible ways for young people to make complaints about verbal and physical abuse.

**Conclusion: Who listens and how?**

Young people in these circumstances, like everyone else, have their own truths. For example, when asked why young people offend, many will immediately diagnose the problem entirely in terms of ‘boredom’ and a failure of local services to provide them with alternative activities to crime. When we look at the profile of these young people, their family lives and experiences as children, this is patently not the whole story.

While it is of course important for young people to have things to keep them busy and that they can afford, all the youth activities in world will not address the deeper issues that many face. The way we listen then is important.

Throughout the project, in every region and in relation to every public service discussed, young people raised the issue of not being listened to. Young people did not feel they had a voice or that people had the time, capability or empathy to understand and to listen to what they had to say.

This does not mean that providing kindly untrained mentors to lend an ear will work to engage these young people. While some mentoring programmes do seem to work, offenders and particularly young people, need access to constructive relationships, support and advice from people who have been through some of the same issues but have come out the other side. They need what we might call ‘critical empathy’: the ability to truly understand the circumstances that have got them into trouble, combined with the capacity to challenge their ‘learned helplessness’.20

User Voice brings this critical empathy to its work with young people who have often been given up on and given up on themselves. We are

able to challenge young people and do not take everything offenders say at face value but seek to hear the ‘unsaid’ and explore the issues that lie beneath people’s stock responses and silence.

One of the key elements of rehabilitation is for offenders to both take responsibility for their actions and to develop a closer relationship between their actions and consequences. Many cited incidents where they had experienced violence, abuse or bullying at home, school or within their community and where there were – in their eyes – no consequences for the perpetrator or support available to them. Some were explicit about the ‘positive’ consequences of their involvement in crime: more money, belonging and a ‘buzz’.

User Voice’s work is based on the premise that rehabilitation requires a rejection of ‘victimhood’. Some of the young people we have talked to internalised this, stressing that it was their choice to offend. Likewise, responses to questions about services’ lack of success were often tempered by comments that recognised that they themselves had not always done ‘their part’.

There were exceptions both ways: some saw themselves as entirely to blame for their lot, while others struggled to accept their role and inhabited the victim role. User Voice is very clear: a significant number of these young people will have been terrorised and victimised at home, on the street or in prison. However, our own experiences as offenders convince us that it is essential for young people to be encouraged to move on from this. Empathy should not involve blind acceptance but an understanding of the complex logic that offenders can develop in justifying their actions.

Rejecting victimhood does not mean ignoring people’s need for validation: all of the young people we worked with in some way wanted service providers and policy makers to accept how their experiences had contributed to their behaviour and life chances. This makes sense: if others write them off as innately ‘bad’, there was little hope of rehabilitation. This does not require interventions to abandon focus on personal accountability – far from it – but it does underline the importance of acknowledging the context of their behaviour and the choices they faced.

**Recommendation**: excluded young people should be given more opportunity to feedback on the services that seek to address their offending. This is more not less important as public spending cuts impact on services. Local justice agencies need to work together in developing more effective feedback procedures and in enabling excluded youth to play a collective role in relation to justice services. This needs to implicate them in the process of success (and failure).

In the last stage of this project, User Voice now hopes to work with local agencies and some of those young people involved in helping them to co-design some of the solutions suggested. Doing so challenges these young people’s perceptions of themselves as both offenders and victims.
This report sends a powerful message and not just to those young people who have been involved. It serves as a reminder to the public, practitioners and policy makers that – given the opportunity – individuals who make up ‘hard to reach’ groups, some of whom will have spent years on the wrong side of the law, can make a hugely positive contribution.
RYAN

There is such a wide variety of how people get involved in criminal activity that there is no one single cause for it. It ranges with all different types of criminal activity. If its violence it could be a poor upbringing from home, be it lack of role models or an abusive family member. It could be what the media is portraying in films or games. If it’s a drug-related offence or sex-related offence, it could be that their friends or family members are involved.

If a young person feels ignored, they’re going to be annoyed and frustrated about it and they’re going to want to do something to make sure they’re being heard. I think as long as there’s someone in their life that they can sit down and talk to no matter what. It can be about confusing feelings they’re having growing up, any problems they’re having at home, as long as its non-judgmental and isn’t set out to be a meeting. It doesn’t always work, but for me that’s a key point that every child should have.

There have been times in my life where I’ve had to go to meetings, medical and legal, where I don’t feel my opinion has been heard. I’ve had to start raising my voice to be heard, or go through other tactics to be heard. That doesn’t always end up in the best place but sometimes you just need to have your opinions put forward.

I always found it funny that if I’m going to be talking to someone about a problem, if they haven’t experienced it, how can they understand it. I think a lot more ex-offenders need to be able to help people stop offending, as long as they’ve stopped offending themselves. If they can tell people their experiences and help them to change either how they’re feeling or what’s going on at home, or bullying or something like that.

If I was in a school now and I was helping a young person with their problems, if I saw that they were on the same path that I went down, I would be warning them of everything that I’ve gone through with all the hardships and the family let-downs. I would make sure that they are aware of that so that they at least have the choice to change and they know what’s going to happen.

I spent six months inside thinking this was the world’s fault. By the time I came out my perspective had changed. I saw the expressions on my family’s face. The first time my mum came to visit me in custody, when I saw her expression, I had to learn the hard way that I had to do it all for myself. Everyone struggles at some point in their life. I’m hoping that that’s the last time I struggle in my life and that I can move forward.

If they don’t absolutely have to do it, they put it off until they have to do it. I understand that every company is trying to save money because of the deficit we’re in, but sometimes just need to get off their high horse, pull their thumb out, or whatever phrase you want to use … to actually do their job.
WHAT’S YOUR STORY?

YOUNG OFFENDERS’ INSIGHTS INTO TACKLING YOUTH CRIME AND ITS CAUSES