



USER VOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

**THE USER VOICE
OF LOCKDOWN**

PEOPLE IN PRISON AND ON PROBATION TELL US THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SO FAR

EXTREME RESTRICTIONS

Prisons were rightly identified as a serious risk of contagion at the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, with some of the worst outbreaks internationally occurring in prisons like San Quentin State Prison in California. To try to prevent the spread of the virus, prisoners in England and Wales have experienced severe lockdown, confined to their cells for 23 hours per day, with visits, support services and education effectively suspended for more than three months.

These measures were put in place to reduce harm and save lives and have been largely successful in this. That is not to minimise the loss of life or infections to both prisoners and prison officers.

Yet.

While these measures have reduced the spread of the virus, they have had unintended consequences. Conditions of virtual solitary confinement are not sustainable as a long-term solution to the crisis if we are to protect the mental health of people in prison.

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“It's a frustrating time for me as the 23 hours lock up has stressed my mental health. I suffer from PTSD and sometimes have vivid flashbacks of past incidents. Earlier this week, I was taken on an "act" as I was having suicidal thoughts. Since then my medication has been re-stabilised and I feel much better. I haven't been able to implement my coping mechanisms as I have no access to education, employment or general time out of my cell which allows me to have some form of normality.”

Male prisoner

As the rest of the country comes out of lockdown and moves through the government's stages of response, we need to ensure that those in prison are not being unnecessarily kept in their cells and that when do they do need to be in isolation it is made as bearable as possible.

FOR THOSE IN THE COMMUNITY, PROBATION HAS BEEN JUST AS EXTREME.

For most people accessing the internet at home over WIFI or on the phone via a smartphone is part of everyday life and done without a second thought. For people who cannot afford sustainable accommodation or food to feed themselves or their family, then phone credit, data and WIFI are luxuries.

Yet almost all support services, let alone education, training and even entertainment is now online.

To combat this, some people on probation have been given phones so that their probation officer can contact them. But they are 'dumb' phones, not 'smart phones', and lack the ability to access the internet or even make calls



“I've not been getting calls from probation. I'm struggling with my thoughts and feelings, my mental health and substance misuse, feeling very overwhelmed”

Male on probation

HOW HAVE WE LISTENED?

Like many small charities and particularly those who operate largely face to face delivery, we have very quickly shifted to using other digital forms of communication.

We are contacting people by any means possible.

In the community we are using phone contact, text and other messaging services, email, and video calls. Recently around 20,000 people on probation have been texted and around 90% have consented to us contacting them, an overwhelming response.

For those in prison, we have set up a freephone number so they can call us at no cost and are using the 'Email a Prisoner' scheme in which emails are printed for prisoners the next day.

As a result, while most services have pulled back, **we have directly spoken in-depth with:**

2,206 PEOPLE
IN APRIL, MAY, JUNE & JULY

747 PEOPLE
IN 14 PRISONS

1,459 PEOPLE
ON PROBATION
IN 13 AREAS

WHY LISTEN?

Now more than ever it's crucial to ensure people in prison and on probation are given a voice to identify the issues they are facing and their solutions.

User Voice was one of the last organisations out of prisons and first back as restrictions have eased.

But even during the worst of the lockdown we have listened.

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“User Voice number allows me to express myself freely, as I feel the staff understand my point of view because we're coming from the same place (jail). I don't feel I can be as direct with other organisations.”

Male prisoner

Listening to service users has been shown to improve delivery across hundreds of sectors. They do it in public services for hospitals and transport.

So, why should prison or probation be any different?

We were also compelled to listen.

Because most of us at User Voice have been to prison or on probation, right from the people leading the organisation to everyone delivering our work on the frontline.

So we are them, and they are us.

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"I now feel like I have made an impact and will continue to make a difference, like I have given something back and am changing the lives of others who have been in my situation and who are struggling to see past their conviction or sentence.“

Female on probation

SOME OF THE MAIN ISSUES...

COMMUNICATION

Most people in the UK have been kept updated on the situation and the restrictions with daily Government briefings, the media, Twitter and Facebook. If anything, it's been information overload.

For people in prison and on probation it's been the opposite. They have felt in the dark about what's happening, what the restrictions are, why, when and most importantly the impact this has on everything else.

People in prisons and in the community are telling us they need consistency in communications. It's not that people don't appreciate there is a pandemic going on but with less or no control about their day-to-day people want to be kept informed.

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“We haven't had feedback from survey that was sent out by staff. The survey was asking prisoners what we think is important to open up first i.e. education gym etc.”

Male prisoner

That could be about prison family visits, time out of their cell, access to healthcare or seeing their support worker in person.

MENTAL HEALTH

25% of people in prison who have called us have tried accessing mental health support during the lockdown.

Like many people, those in prison and on probation are struggling with the impact of lockdown on their mental health. But given that over a third of people in prison have mental health problems this is even more worrying. This is compounded by a lack of face to face engagement with mental health services, due to the restrictions and reports of not even being able to access these services at all.

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“Not being able to socialise with people leads me to over think so I go into depression mode.”

Female prisoner

ISSUES IN PRISONS

21%

of the issues raised from people in prison was about the prison regime.

More specifically it was about the **amount of time locked up** in their cell.

We got varying feedback from prisoners across different prisons. At best they are getting an hour out of their cell to exercise and shower. In some prisons its less and some prisoners told us they had not left their cells in days.

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“Before you had the whole hour to have exercise and shower, now its half hour outside then half hour showers, why did they change it especially with social distancing they are making us all cram together?”

Male prisoner

It's not just being stuck in cells. Many people highlighted the poor state of facilities including cells, but also prison wings, showers and recreational facilities, this isolation becomes even worse.

Prisoners reported that little if any routine maintenance is taking place, so cell conditions are deteriorating, and prisoners do not have access to cleaning products. One prisoner even described how he had run out of toilet paper and was having to use a jay cloth instead, again and again.

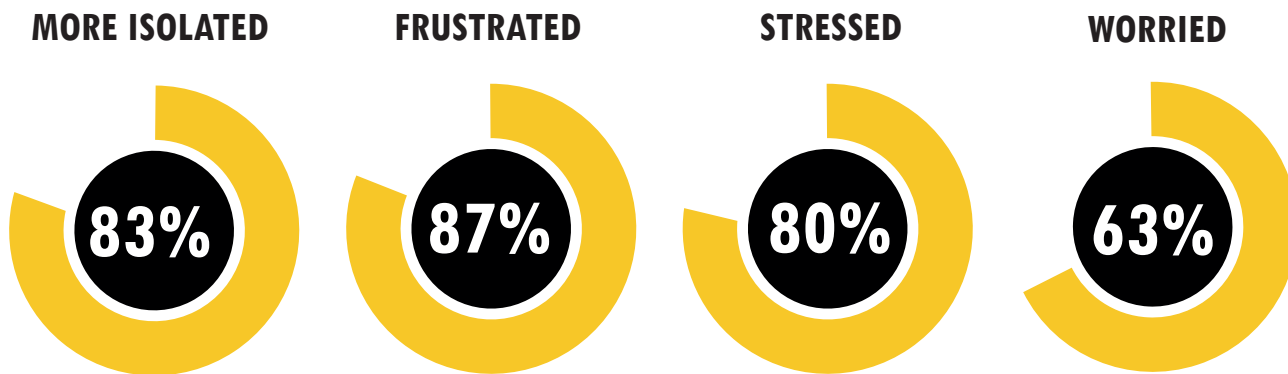
People in prison highlighted fears about how unlock in the community actually makes them less safe.

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“Staff here work between two prisons and now they can go to the pub at the weekend. They keep us all banged up to prevent COVID-19 spread, but the officers don't wear any PPE at all, so they are the ones if any that would bring the infection into the prison”

Female prisoner

People felt:



We asked 115 residents if they'd tried to access **mental health services**, **29 had an only 7 of those had been seen** by a mental health team.

People told us that mental health services were generally either not taking on new clients or stopping support entirely, with prison officers responsible for doing welfare checks.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

People told us they were not receiving the right medication. Ranged from individuals entering prison who were not permitted the medication they take in the community; prisoners returning from hospital appointments refused the medication prescribed by the hospital doctor; and prisoners who had injured themselves and were not prescribed adequate painkillers.



“I had to go to hospital where I was advised to shield for 7-14 days, after 4 days the prison allowed me out. A random person from healthcare saw my hospital discharge papers and decided I was allowed out... ..I feel someone needs to liaise with the patients and understand we've been told things by the hospital.”

Female prisoner

A few prisoners we spoke to who had received telephone assessments questioned how they could be properly assessed in this way. There was even one case where the prisoner then had an allergic reaction to the medication they were initially prescribed following the telephone assessment.

Despite the announcement of an **early release scheme**, some prisoners said that they were not clear on who is eligible and the process and that this was causing a lot of confusion and frustration.

VISITS

And while prisoners understood why **social visits** have not been permitted, they spoke of how they were struggling not seeing family and friends for such an extended period of time, making any mental health issues worse.

Now that social visits are starting again in some places. Many people are concerned that they still won't be able to see their children due to long journeys and shorter visiting times or additional complications such as children who are living in separate households not being able to come together.

There was frustration about the lack of **video visits** and the speed that they are being rolled out across the prison estate. Given the complications for some when it comes to social visits and the likelihood of changes to restrictions in the community, video visits will remain essential in the coming months.

ISSUES FOR PEOPLE ON PROBATION

33% of people on probation said they had stopped receiving one or more support services as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions.

The main ones being mental health, substance misuse, foodbank and housing support.

For people trying to get **mental health** and **substance misuse** support, they are struggling without face to face contact and many don't have WIFI and cannot afford data needed to access the services that have now gone online.

People aren't being updated on changes to probation and **communication** was the main issue for them. This includes minimal contact from their probation officer, difficulties reaching their probation officer and a lack of clarity about what programmes or courses they should be attending as part of their sentence.

People also highlighted issues around the **relationship with their probation officer**. People who had little contact felt they were not a priority and short calls made them feel a burden, that there was a lack of support and they were on their own.

For people required to do **unpaid work** (*community service*) they had received little information on when it would restart, the impact on the number of hours they had to complete and if the original time frames for completion remained.

Suggestions from our council include a regular letter posted to everyone with general information and greater use of text messages to communicate.

What can we take from that?

Many people in prison and on probation didn't and still don't know what's going on, how long for, how and when it will change. Importantly they don't know what impact this has on their day to day life and the support services they need.

This is resulting in further isolation, deepening their mental health, drug and alcohol and other issues that caused their offending in the first place.

IT CAN'T ALL BE BAD, CAN IT?

PRISON

The fact that **call rates** had been reduced and prisoners were being provided with an additional £5 phone credit was helping them to remain in touch with their friends and family.

In some prisons, prisoners told us they were happy to be getting to **shower and exercise**.

Where changes had been made, prisoners welcomed the **extra TV channels** and in-cell **activity packs** to alleviate the boredom.

In two prisons, we were told that **Listeners** (*prisoners providing mental health peer support to other prisoners*) were still active which was crucial to them.

And one **prisoner in isolation** for Covid-19 raised that staff were bringing them regular food and medication and giving them regular health checks.

COMMUNITY



25%

of the people on probation we spoke to said phone and text contact from their probation officer was good.



17%

spoke positively about these interactions.

Those that had positive experiences highlighted that their **welfare** was being checked that there was a level of **consistency** in contact and that their probation officer was being empathetic for their situation.

SO, IS IT WORKING?

There is clearly some good work going on in a really difficult time for everyone involved.

What's interesting, is that everything that people told us was working well are the basics that you would expect for a humane and decent standard of living.

Being able to call family and friends. Exercise and a shower. Ways to be entertained. Some support from others.

But the fact that only small numbers of people highlighted these shows how extreme the situation has been and continues to be for people in prison and on probation during the lockdown.

THEIR SOLUTIONS (NOT OUR RECOMMENDATIONS)

There are no easy solutions for how to operate a justice system in such unprecedented conditions. However, the place to start is to listen to those who are at the coalface of these services. Rather than give a list of recommendations that we have interpreted are needed, we let people speak for themselves. Given the right opportunity, encouragement, and support people in prison and on probation can tell you what works, what doesn't, and most importantly how things can be improved.

YOU JUST HAVE TO ASK

People in prison suggested...

- Providing them with strategies of how to cope with lockdown
- Providing updates and clear criteria on the early release policy
- Appropriate prisoners could go door to door to explain to non-English-speaking residents what is happening
- Producing a leaflet about the regime to go under cell doors
- That basic prison jobs (cleaner, servery and laundry) could be rotated to give everyone time out of their cells
- Trying to ensure that as many healthy fresh and BAME items as possible are available on the canteen
- They have access to cleaning products to maintain the cleanliness of their own cells
- Increased visits at their cell door to check prisoner's mental health and welfare
- Staggering release of medication to ensure social distancing
- That key workers should visit residents at their door to maintain the relationship and provide information and support
- Changing the films being shown more regularly
- Being allowed nail polish, scents or other personal grooming items **“at least so myself and my surroundings can smell nice, it cheers me up”**

Female Prisoner

WHAT'S NEXT

This is a snapshot directly from a significant number of people in prison and on probation in the most extreme of restrictions.

Restrictions are starting to ease and there is a plan in place for how prisons and probation will operate while coronavirus remains a threat but where the most severe restrictions are no longer proportionate or sustainable.

While this will have an undoubted positive impact for people in prison and on probation, what are the negative consequences of the past few months?

People have been locked up in their cell for longer and further isolated from their community, with limited access to mental health and other support services.

How are people feeling? How are they coping? What additional needs do they have?

Ultimately how can we ensure that we do not have a sudden surge in issues such as mental health, self-harm, suicide, violence and ultimately re-offending.

So it is important, crucial even, now more than ever, to continue to speak to people about what is happening, why, the consequences and their solutions for their health, safety and wellbeing and ensure they are central to any decisions made.

WHO ARE WE?

We are User Voice, a charity led and delivered by people with personal experience of being in prison and on probation.

User Voice was created for and by people who have been in prison and on probation. Lived experience means we engage empathetically instead of sympathetically.

We exist to reduce offending and support rehabilitation by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policymakers hear their voices.

We are committed to making the criminal justice system work for everyone. When people receive the support to stop re-offending, the whole community benefits.

We work across the country in two-thirds of probation areas and one-fifth of prisons.

Every year (before Covid-19 that is) we give over 30,000 people a voice and give them the opportunity, encouragement, and support to speak directly with decision makers at a local, regional, and national level.

We are independent. We don't deliver services.

So, we don't have an agenda to filter what people tell us and promote one service or another.

We work in a democratic way. By that we mean that we don't select who speaks. Neither does the prison, probation, or anyone else. We let the community decide who it wants to represent itself. And our elected reps are broadly representative of their community.

And finally, we are user-led. That's a bit of jargon to say that we have been there, done it and got the t-shirt.

We know what it's like to be locked up in prison. To have drug, alcohol, and mental health issues. To live on the streets. Now we are skilled professionals and work at all levels of the organisation, from frontline delivery to the CEO and everywhere in between.



It means that if you have previously been convicted of a crime there is no limit to where you can go and what you can achieve in User Voice.

And it means that we are running our own organisation. We have the skills, passion, and ability, we've just never been given the opportunity. Well now we have.

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