

Engaging with the wider community

HMP Erlestoke (OL) Question Time



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In several prisons 'Question Time' - style events have been organised as part of citizenship classes. The prisoners have led the organisation of these events including brainstorming ideas for speakers and collecting questions from prisoners to ask the panel.

One example is at HMP Erlestoke as part of a citizen development project.

A representative group of learners and education staff had attended an initial LSIS post-16 citizenship support programme training event with Jose Aguiar and they were enthused by the opportunity to engage in such a lively adult debate. In view of the forthcoming general election and the topical, high profile issue of prisoners' eligibility to vote, it was proposed that an activity be organised to raise awareness of the electoral process and government appointment.

The choice of activity was agreed by a group of learners who considered various options before deciding on a question time event. Some of them regularly watched this programme on television whilst for others this was a totally new concept. The group decided that this would be an appropriate activity of current relevance that would encourage participants to increase their understanding of the democratic process and engage in voting in custody (as and when possible) and on release. It also provided them with a platform to converse with outside agencies on issues of importance to them.

The learners had autonomy to plan the event, with the learning and skills co-ordinator approving arrangements and acting as communicator. They organised meetings and decided on their own roles, the suggested panel participants, the venue, proposed date, learner involvement and the categories for questions including criminal justice, social policy, parenting, education, public services and foreign policy. The learners (a diverse group) worked as a team, contributing and listening to each other's viewpoints, with lively discussions leading to negotiated agreement. They decided that for this event they wanted to invite the local prospective parliamentary candidates for the three main political parties and directors from the Prison Reform Trust and Operation Black Vote to be potential panel members.

The learners produced posters to inform others of the event and displayed these on each wing and communal areas such as the education department, library, workshops etc. They also devised and sent out pro-formas to each wing seeking suggested questions to be included. The group met to analyse these responses and make collective decisions regarding which questions would be included, which might be amalgamated or amended to improve the question and which lacked gravitas for this occasion or were unsuitable as they related to personal circumstances. These questions were reviewed and refined several times until the group were entirely satisfied with the calibre of questions for the panel.

An itinerary for the afternoon was devised taking account of the prison regime hours. Applications were also sought from those who wished to form the audience. An attendance of approximately 60 learners was agreed and invitations were sent out. The organising group had highlighted to attendees that their conduct would be a deciding factor in whether subsequent events would be considered viable. The itinerary and final questions were sent to panellists in advance of the event. Preparation also involved liaison with catering learners regarding refreshments, with video production course learners regarding recording parts of the event and with the chaplaincy regarding the venue. Details of the visitors were sent to the gate and staff escorted them to the venue. Group members ushered in the audience and one learner opened the proceedings by welcoming and introducing the panellists and the rationale and itinerary for the afternoon.

Another learner assumed the awesome responsibility of acting as panel chairman and he explained how the debate would be conducted. Learners from the audience were identified to stand up and ask the main questions. The chairman ensured all panellists had opportunities to provide answers or opinions and then sought follow-on questions or comments from the audience. Break time allowed learners to mingle with the five panellists and other external visitors and enter discussions, ask further questions and offer their thoughts and concerns. Panellists remained with the organising group and the video team to record their thoughts on the event, content and organisation. The feedback from the panellists was hugely complementary, commenting on the intelligence and calibre of the questions posed, the excellent organisation and interactions with the learners.

The event was an immensely positive experience. Education staff and governors who were in the audience were very impressed. The learners all conducted themselves in an exemplary fashion and were a credit to themselves, the project and the prison. The visitors were presented with ceramic bowls that had been made by the learners as tokens of appreciation.

The event has also furthered educational opportunities at the prison. Through their involvement in producing a DVD of the event, the video production course learners were able to meet their vocational course criteria, evidence key skills and achieve a purposeful outcome for the citizenship project. One of the organisers used the citizenship experience as the basis for their level 4 English speaking board examination for which their passionate presentation received distinctions in every category. Two other groups of learners also enrolled on the aspects of citizenship programme.