

Development through the year

Ideas from around the sector



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A prison education year is not the same as a college, school or university year as there are no holidays or terms and everyone studying in prison have different dates of release and can be studying different subjects at different times. However, over time in an establishment, it is important for the learner voice activities to develop so the quality of dialogue can improve and that interest is maintained. Some ways in which prisons have developed their learner voice activities over time are mentioned below:

1. Adding accredited training can help improve dialogue and maintain interest, such as OCN, OCR, ASDAN, Duke of Edinburgh etc
2. Increased sense of ownership by the learners. Several of the forums PET visited had designed their own distinctive t-shirts with their own logo or slogan. The suggestion boxes at HMYOI Cookham Wood were designed beautifully by the art class.
3. At HMP Elmley the learner forum developed the concept of Learning Champions.
4. At HMYOI Cookham Wood the reps asked to be able to attend a section of the SMT meeting. This was agreed and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Youth Council can attend.
5. Humour and fun is vital in keeping the forums interesting and people engaged.
6. Refreshments. As with many activities in prisons, provision of some basic refreshments can be an added bonus for prisoners and help maintain interest, particularly if the role is unpaid.
7. Showing professionalism and respect. At one council meeting PET attended the Governor referred to the prisoners as 'gentlemen'. This respectful language then set a professional and respectful tone for the meeting, which was then responded to in the same manner by the prisoners.

8. Quick wins. Proposing and gaining some 'quick wins' is important to keep up engagement.
9. Developing peer support and mentoring. At HMP Elmley all the Learning Champions have regular meetings to support each other, discuss difficult situations, offer solutions and work through strategies to promote learning and improve education. Being a rep can bring pressure or jealousy from others and can also be difficult in terms of managing expectations of what influence they have. At HMP Elmley many of the Learning Champions attend a peer mentoring course to improve their listening and communication skills so they can better support each other, as well as other prisoners.
10. Recognition of achievement. At HMP Elmley the class reps can receive nominations for a 'Learner of Month'. The forum reps then discuss the nominations and agree a winner.

One example of representatives and staff working together on a particular field of interest to develop a 'community of expertise' is the Citizenship Reducing Reoffending Project at HMP Pentonville. The citizenship reps decided that it would be useful to have a 'go-to' guide featuring organisations that can help them with the seven reducing reoffending pathways. The reps researched and wrote the content, designed the leaflet and had a launch event, inviting outside speakers. The resettlement, library and induction staff assisted the prisoners to produce this guide, both sharing expertise and information with each other. This activity has now developed with the formation of '7 Pathways Reps', including reps focused on Education, Training and Employment outcomes.