

Building staff support

Balancing competing demands



Staff Survey – HMYOI Feltham

Before launching their student council, HMYOI Feltham, in partnership with PET, conducted a set of focus groups with the young people, as well as an all staff survey that was promoted on the staff intranet. 'Survey Monkey' was used for the ease of use and collation of results. Staff were asked about their experience of service user involvement activities, their attitudes to education and their thoughts on giving the young people more say. All staff, uniformed and non-uniformed, were invited to respond and both did in equal numbers. The results of the survey were fed back to the staff. This enabled the management team and those committed to establishing a student council some insight into some of the barriers, but also found a mostly positive response to the idea.

Staff and Prisoner Voting – HMYOI Aylesbury

At HMYOI Aylesbury the charity User Voice spent several months preparing both the staff and young people for the prison council. Uservoice spent time talking to staff, explaining what the Prison Council hoped to achieve, how it would run and answering any questions they had. They found a few particular members of staff, who were particularly interested in the concept, who were able to help spread the word to others. They also helped Uservoice to get over the many practical and logistical barriers that exist in the prison setting which could easily frustrate a project such as this. For example User Voice had about 60 prisoners interested in receiving training in participation skills, however had been told they could not have that number of prisoners in one room together. Fortunately the time taken to build staff support meant that this problem was overcome. Also given the lack of graphics package on the computers and lack of printer ink, the young people could unfortunately not design or print their own posters using ICT. Fortunately a supportive staff member agreed to take the young people's hand drawn designs and then designed and print them on their home computer.

The strongest influence however on the staff was from a young person himself. In the lead up to the election the young people had to give a speech about their parties manifesto to over 100 staff. After one particularly powerful and moving speech from a young person, the staff gave him a spontaneous standing ovation!

Staff / prisoner consultation days –HMYOI Cookham Wood

At HMYOI Cookham Wood, the young people formulated proposals based on the four elements of a 'healthy prison': safety, respect, purposeful activity and resettlement. An event was then arranged by the Governor whereby the young people each had a desk and flip chart in the four corners of a large room, one for each element of a healthy prison. Staff were then invited to

drop-in and talk to each of the groups in turn about their proposals and to discuss ways forward. This gave the staff the chance to see some of the proposals and speak to the Youth Council reps about their ideas and understand better what the Youth Council was about.

Seeing is believing

At most of the learner voice activities PET visited, the key to securing staff support was about seeing the suggestions of the prisoners come to fruition and seeing the positive impact they have. Having some 'quick wins' when you first set up a forum or council is therefore key to building support and momentum from both the prisoners and the staff. These successes therefore need to be visible, recognised and promoted to the prisoners and staff by having good feedback mechanisms.

A 'You say, We did' notice board is one way of providing feedback, but this should be placed in an accessible place. In one establishment the noticeboard was in the education corridor but no-one was able to look at it as prisoners were not allowed to stand in that particular area! Also having the notice board in education means that learners and staff in other parts of the prison, such as the gym or workshops, do not get updated. A feedback mechanism needs to reach as many staff and prisoners as possible to raise awareness of learner voice and what it is achieving.

A parallel system for staff – HMP Elmley

One theme from across the visits is that staff are more likely to engage in learner voice if they feel they also have a voice. Therefore it is important to think about mechanisms to ensure staff can make suggestions and feel listened to. One way of this is to have a SMT/staff consultation day based on the 4 aspects of the healthy prison as described above, for staff to meet with the governor and SMT to discuss their suggestions and opinions. At HMP Elmley they have a 'staff voice' suggestion box in the education staff room and have 'staff voice' reps.

Strong leadership Positive impact on regime - HMYOI Cookham Wood and HMYOI Aylesbury

Learner voice seems to work most effectively is where there is strong leadership from the top and where the Governor is personally seen by the staff and prisoners to be actively engaged in the participation of the prisoners. Where the Governor personally meets on a regular basis with the reps, such as at HMYOI Cookham Wood and HMYOI Aylesbury, this sets the example and communicates to both staff and prisoners that this is not tokenistic, that it is meaningful participation and is a priority in that establishment.

Positive impact on regime

Staff want and should expect to work in a safe and enjoyable environment. Prison staff on the visits told PET that by giving prisoners a structured route to raise concerns and have their ideas and suggestions heard, this can result in a better and safer establishment. It can also help to decrease incidents of self harm. One example given was a young person who had been on suicide watch (an ACCT) and was a self-harmer, but following his involvement with the council had built up his self esteem and was eventually taken off the ACCT.