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Review #001

HIGH STAKES



High Stakes

Prison Drug Policy Symposium Review #001

“There was no ‘them’ and ‘us’ in this room, only us.”

Collaboration through honest, open discussion was the order of the day at Volteface’s latest event, High Stakes: Prison Drug Policy Symposium, held at London’s Barbican Centre on Friday May 5.

The Issues

Over the last year, rising rates of drug use, suicides, violence and self-harm in our prisons have increasingly hit the headlines, with growing problems associated with the sale and use of novel psychoactive substances (NPS) highlighted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman and the Ministry of Justice as a major challenge facing jails up and down the country.

To generate fresh ideas on how to tackle this crisis, High Stakes: Prison Drug Policy Symposium was the first in a series of events as part of Volteface's collaboration with Rob Ralphs and Rebecca Askew, of the Substance Use and Addictive Group at Manchester Metropolitan University, following their Fellowship Grant from Metropolis. It was also held in conjunction with User Voice, a dedicated user involvement charity which set the tone for the symposium with its emphasis on the value of lived experience in finding solutions.

The Research

Volteface's research in this area has been driven off the back of:

- George McBride, [*High Stakes: An Inquiry into the Drugs Crisis in English Prisons*](#);
- User Voice's [*Spice: The Bird Killer*](#); &
- Rob Ralphs, Lisa Williams, Rebecca Askew and Anna Norton's [*Adding Spice to the Porridge: The development of a synthetic cannabinoid market in an English prison*](#).

The Big Question

How do we work together to improve prison drug policy?

The Day

High Stakes: Prison Drug Policy Symposium was a lively, engaging day full of informed and passionate contributions from ex-prisoners, academics, policy-makers, campaigners, prison staff, drug treatment workers and a host of other individuals and organisations interested and engaged with those working or living in our prisons.

Free of the constraints of a traditional conference, the symposium employed an open space facilitation method, to utilise the collective intelligence of the group and ensure that everybody could discuss the issues which were important to them.

All attendees first wrote down what they felt were the main issues when it comes to addressing prison drug policy and from these ideas six main themes for discussion were established: peer-led support, prison security and testing, treatment and therapy, awareness and education, prison policy and staffing, and mental health and wellbeing.

Each person then joined one of the six discussion areas, with facilitators noting down any recommendations made. The rule of ‘two feet’ was employed, allowing people to move between the groups and contribute.

The day came to a close with each person voting – via a simple ‘dot democracy’ method – on which of the recommendations formulated by all the discussion groups were the most important.



Recurring Themes across the Discussion Groups

The issue is wider than just tackling Spice use or drugs in general: the conditions in which prisoners are kept is creating a huge demand

“When they put a tv in the cell they think ‘we’ve got them occupied’... Do you really want to watch tv for 9-10 hours a day? I spent more time reading and writing, that was my bird killer, but some people don’t have that ability.”

Richie Household’s account of his experience in prison captures a point that was reiterated by many attendees: that inmates must have meaningful activities to occupy their time and to better themselves so they don’t feel the need to turn to drugs. These could range from higher levels of education, prison work, practical skills building and therapeutic classes to physical exercise and even meditation.

“Don’t focus on Spice, focus on general prisoner welfare”, “Time and again you hear about boredom as the catalyst – this needs to be addressed” and “meaningful activities to get people off drugs is a quick win” were a few of the other comments touching on this point.

References were also made to Bruce K. Alexander’s Rat Park experiment in British Columbia in the 1970s which hypothesised that drugs do not cause addiction, but the living conditions of their consumers can.

Questions were also raised as to whether the zero tolerance approach towards drug use in prisons worked. Dr Karen Duke, associate professor in criminology at Middlesex University, said that zero tolerance may work for a small proportion of inmates, but not for the wider prison population and that a more holistic approach was necessary involving “other services that might be offered within a prison setting, for example, health, literacy... policy responses can’t just be about drugs, it’s about a whole range of other issues.”

Therapeutic conditions and lived experience is essential

Nick Hickmott, of Addaction, summed up why prisons need to be places where prisoners can talk to each other about their issues and those who were once in their shoes: “It should be about relationships and getting people in a room. Everyone knows Spice is bad. It’s about saying ‘you don’t need to use Spice to not think about the things that are getting to you’... There need to be honest, open, non-judgemental conversations around this. Ideally, you want prisons to be a therapeutic environment.”

Groups such as AA and NA can really make a difference, said a number of attendees, and trained ex-prisoners and ex-drug users should be hired to run such groups or talk to inmates about their experiences. Highlighting success stories and providing positive role models would be powerful as prisoners need people to whom they can relate.

One man recalled of his time in prison: “One day a woman comes in and slams her bag down

and we're like 'so why are you here? What's your story?' and she says 'I have nothing to tell you'. 'Then what are you doing here?'

Changing public perceptions of prisoners is a challenge

The influence of the Daily Mail and the impact of negative public attitudes towards prisoners was raised in more than one of the discussion groups. There is the difficulty that politicians are often led by public opinion on issues such as justice and a hard-line approach towards the conditions in which prisoners are kept is still consistently finding its way on to the front pages of influential newspapers.

"There's no money because the public doesn't understand. If the Daily Mail prints a story saying 'prison is a soft touch' then they are not going to get the money." Another added: "If you just look at the front cover of The Sun, you just think 'wasters.'

It was suggested that, if the financial case could be made for intervention and prevention on drugs issues, politicians may be more willing to listen. However, regard for public opinion, is still likely to dictate. Kieron Ball, of Prison Voicemail – a service that allows loved-ones to leave voice messages for inmates at any time – said that, in his discussions with officials, the public's perception of prisoners being given greater access to technology always came up. He said it is clear to see that "the Ministry of Justice are afraid of the Daily Mail."

Mandatory drug testing should not be the focus

People questioned how effective mandatory drug tests were, with some, such as Alex Stevens, professor in criminal justice at the University of Kent, saying that the rise of Spice in our prisons is a direct result of prisoners wishing to evade detection in such tests.

"It's more useful to identify supply routes than users," said one attendee.

Instead of hunting for users, identification of supply routes had to be a priority. Security was a key issue, with a number of people commenting on prison staff not being searched as they enter prisons and links made to their low pay acting as an incentive to earn a bit extra through smuggling. The role of mobile phones in maintaining a supply was also highlighted, with signals needing to be blocked.

Chantal Encavey suggested that mandatory drugs testing in prisons should simply be replaced by counselling to address the root causes of drug use: "You don't need to test people, you just need to talk to people – it's quite fundamental."

Improved conditions, training and pay for prison staff

Prison staff having the skills and motivation to help prisoners with substance abuse was a key point that came up across a number of discussion groups. Staff shortages in the prison estate have led to prison officers constantly firefighting, having low morale and not feeling valued enough in order to go above and beyond to help prisoners better their lives.

A treatment worker said: “Staff aren’t paid enough to be able to offer that reflective thinking and support” that’s necessary to tackle why prisoners are using drugs.

In some cases, the situation is fuelling prison officer corruption, with some staff supplementing low incomes by bringing drugs into prisons.

On a fundamental level, the government must either invest in more prison staff or reduce the size of the prison population.

Good pay, the recruitment of experienced staff members and training for prison officers to help them understand the realities of drug use, addiction, harm reduction and mental health issues are all essential. In the short-term, it was suggested that they should at least be given adequate training on how to respond to NPS use.

Wider questions were also raised about the purpose of prison and whether it is the right intervention for vulnerable people.

Rebecca Askew, of Manchester Metropolitan University, said: “Why are we sending people to prison? What is the purpose of prison? People need to be rehabilitated. But, sometimes, they don’t have the support there, any hope or aspiration so both staff and prisoners are victims of their circumstances. Everyone is operating on a firefighting approach day to day. We need to stop sending people to prison and re-evaluate the punitive approach we have as a society.”

One prison officer said there was also variation in staff members’ own mindsets as to whether prison is there to primarily punish or rehabilitate: “Some prison officers are all about punishment, whereas others have that more social justice understanding”.

Understanding root causes

A more honest conversation needs to be had about drug use when it comes to raising awareness and educating. “It’s not so much about being aware, but about getting to the root of the problem”, we need to “tackle root causes of use, not users” and “move away from treating individual drugs and focus on the reasons for use” were just a few of the comments that sum up a point that was reiterated by many at the symposium.

Education on drugs and awareness campaigns need to inform people around the realities of drug use and why people use, with one person commenting that messages saying “don’t do drugs, drugs are bad” are not helpful to users. One ex-prisoner said: “It’s quite pleasurable if

you're banged up in a cell for 23 hours a day... we need to talk about the elephant in the room." Informing people about harm reduction was also a key point.

There were also a number of suggestions that prison was not the right place for drug addicts committing acquisitive crime. One person said: "Sending an addict to prison as punishment is not the solving the issue", with others commenting that this must be seen as a health issue rather than one requiring the criminal justice response.



Recommendations of Discussion Groups

Peer-led support

- Train and hire ex-prisoners and ex-users to work as educators inside prisons
- Make peer support groups – such as AA or NA – more available in jails
- Increase awareness of the existence of peer support groups in prisons among inmates
- All prisons should employ someone with lived experience full-time

Prison security and drug testing

- Abolish mandatory drug tests
- Use the money spent on testing on more therapeutic means to tackle root causes of drug use, such as peer support groups or counselling
- Focus on disrupting supply: search prison officers entering jails and block mobile phone signals

Treatment and therapy

- Treatment needs to work for the wider prison population – the focus cannot just be on treating heroin addiction, for example
- Introduce yoga, meditation, acupuncture into prisons
- Create a drug treatment prison or more drug-free wings
- Stop sending drug addicts to prison: develop alternative ways to help them outside of the criminal justice system in healthcare and therapeutic environments

Awareness and education

- Educate prison staff and inmates on drug use and harm reduction
- Educate politicians and policy-makers on drug use and harm reduction
- Information in educational material and awareness campaigns should reflect the reality of drug use and focus on root causes
- Consider how to tackle the negative public perception of prisons created by the media that impacts what politicians are willing to do to help prisoners
- Highlight success stories
- Encourage open, honest and non-judgemental conversations between peers and prisoners and prison staff in jails

Prison policy and staffing

- Focus on wider issues fuelling drug use in prisons and consider a more holistic approach to tackling this
- Create meaningful activities for prisoners to alleviate boredom and tackle demand for drugs. This could include more jobs, activities that allow inmates to learn new skills, mandatory physical exercise or higher level educational opportunities
- Address the question of limited resources: the government needs to increase prison staff numbers or reduce the size of the prison population
- Invest in prison staff so they feel valued and better able to help prisoners: better pay and training and employing people with adequate life experience
- Policy-makers must understand the impact of policies and the 'law of unintended consequences' – mandatory drug testing does not reduce drug use in prison as inmates switch to using different drugs
- Stop 28 day recall to prevent offenders being incentivised to return to prison for a short time to make money selling drugs

Mental health and wellbeing

- Provide treatment services for mental health in prisons
- Take measures to prevent misdiagnosis of prisoners' mental health conditions
- Medical staff should be on-call to help prisoners with mental health issues



Top Five Recommendations

The recommendations that received the most 'dot democracy' votes were:

- More peer support
- Prison officer training on drugs
- Meaningful activities for prisoners to alleviate boredom
- Stop the criminalisation of drug addicts
- End 28-day recall

Recommendation Themes

There were a number of recurring themes among the popular recommendations on the day. We will be analysing these in depth in the near future but there are some interesting points to note in the meantime. In descending order these were the most prevalent themes:

1. Education– particularly the education of staff, and notably not on the harms of drug use
2. Peer Support – increased access to support and integrating lived experience into prison life
3. Staffing – the need for better pay, training and intelligent management to utilise specific individual's skills
4. Prison life – improving the prison environment to reduce demand and improve environment for treatment
5. Law Reform – decriminalising addicts, stopping 28 day recall, scrapping MDT & legalising cannabis
6. Treatment – availability & continuity of care were discussed along with many other promising specific suggestions

Notably absent from discussions were calls for better employment opportunities and technological innovation (with the exception of phone jamming).

Thank You

Volteface would like to say a big thank you to everyone who attended from the many different organisations who made the day so worthwhile: Addaction; Adfam; Build on Belief; Drug and Alcohol Training, Research and Consultancy; HM Prison Service; HMP Rye Hill; Institute for Criminal Policy Research; Janus Solutions Treatment; Kings College London; Manchester Metropolitan University; Martindale Pharma; Metropolis; Middlesex University; Ministry of Justice; NHS Commissioning; NHS England; NOMS; Prison Voicemail; RAPT; Rehabilitation and Assurance – HMPRS; Social Value World; Sodexo; University of Kent; User Voice; VoiceAbility.

Next Steps

Volteface will be contacting everyone who attended the symposium in the weeks ahead to get their thoughts on the ideas raised. With this broader picture, a detailed report will be produced on how best to address the issue of the drugs crisis in our prisons going forward. A video of the day will also be released through Volteface's website, together with clips of 'messages for the minister' that those in attendance wanted to share. All of this will contribute to Volteface's lobbying for change, with the aim of presenting it to the new team in the Ministry of Justice following the general election.

Please do get in touch with Volteface if you are keen to work towards improving the state of our prisons and believe you have something you can contribute.

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