

NECG: Response to RR3 consultation on substance misuse and addiction in the criminal justice system

Date December 2017

This paper provides the views of the National Expert Citizens Group (NECG) on the RR3 consultation on substance misuse and addiction in the criminal justice system. The group met on Thursday 7th December in Newcastle at the ‘Road to Recovery’ Café. Over 30 individuals with lived experience contributed to the response from 12 different locations around England: Newcastle & Gateshead; West Yorkshire; Liverpool; Manchester; Blackpool; Stoke-on-Trent; Bristol; Nottingham; Birmingham; Lambeth, Lewisham & Southwark; Camden & Islington and the South East Partnership (Brighton & Hove, Eastbourne and Hastings).

Background

[RR3 is the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group](#). Its purpose is to build a strong and effective partnership between the voluntary sector and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). [Clinks](#) provides the secretariat function for the group and its chair. On the 11th October RR3 held a roundtable event in London to examine service user needs and priorities around substance misuse and addiction services in the criminal justice system. Two NECG members were able to attend the event but the number of attendees was restricted. One of the NECG members who attended wrote a blog about his experience – this, alongside further documents from the event, are available on the NECG website:

<http://necguk.org.uk/rr3-roundtable-on-substance-misuse-and-addiction-for-people-involved-with-the-criminal-justice-system/>

In order to obtain a wider consultation on the core questions, the last NECG meeting asked the group their views on the same areas of interest. This paper provides a summary of their response. **Please note that the views and opinions expressed within this paper are those of the group based on their own experiences.**

Response

Summary: *The system focuses on penalising and punishment. It does not address the core issues behind substance misuse and therefore will remain ineffective in stopping ‘revolving doors’ of the same individuals entering the system. Staff training is inadequate and support is insufficient. The group feel that the solutions should follow the core principles and interventions of the Fulfilling Lives: Multiple Needs programme: peer support, person-centred care pathways, navigators to assist with access to support services, clear and easily accessible information, sectors working together and communicating better, and tackling stigma head-on.*

CORE ISSUES

Overall

- **Criminal justice focuses on stopping the supply and misuse of substances; it does not seek to resolve the underlying reasons as to why someone has a substance misuse problem.** There is a general lack of understanding around *why* individuals use substances or have addictions in the criminal justice system. The focus is on the fact that the addiction exists and must stop. This often means service users are told *what* will done to/for them and their addiction. This approach is made worse by stereotypes and stigma surrounding addiction as service users feel that that they are shamed by their addiction. The result is that some will not disclose addiction problems or feel they have adequate support to address the reasons for having the problem in the first place. As a result, the group question whether rehabilitation is the aim of the system.
- **Substance misuse often occurs to address mental health issues and is a coping mechanism to deal with experiences of past and current trauma and neglect.** There is a distinct lack of understanding around mental health issues and in addition, there is a severe shortage in mental health support.
- **Short sentences in prison do not work.** They do not provide time to access required services for rehabilitation and only lead to a ‘revolving door’ where individuals continually serve sentences.
- **For some, prison is seen as a preferable option.** It provides a roof, warmth, food, companionship – core elements that are often missing in a service user’s life.



- **Individual sectors do not communicate and work together (homelessness, mental health, substance misuse and criminal justice).** This leads to a lack of communication and as a result some service users receive little or no support while others receive substantial support (although this can often be the offer of the same support). In regards to the last point – some of the group felt that there was a lot of duplication in services rather than reviewing what was needed and providing it – for example, there is a distinct lack of available mental health support and trauma counselling has a 6-8 month waiting list. Addressing this could lead to possible savings if services aren't overlapping in provision.

Within prisons

- **Core support that works in the community is not available in prisons and needs to be made accessible.** This includes: fellowships, peer support and probation services.
- **Prison staff are not suitably trained on substance misuse issues or mental health.** This leads to a disconnect between staff and service users, creates a power imbalance and often can result in resentment. As a result, rehabilitation is less likely.
- **It is easier to obtain drugs in prison than outside.** There is a belief by some group members that prisons know this and allow them to be available because an individual on drugs is calmer, happier and easier to 'control' than one who is not on drugs and is left to deal with the mental health issues they are not being supported with.
- **There is no choice on your recovery pathway.** Service users are not involved in their care and recovery pathway; they are not provided options. They are told what will be done to/for them. This does not provide a person-centered approach, which is repeatedly reported as being the most effective way to ensure recovery.
- **Some processes remove support systems from service users.** For example, if an individual is transferred, families are not notified and are unable to be notified due to data protection. This removes their visiting access to a service user that can often be an essential support system for recovery.
- **Individuals placed on remand when not guilty lose everything outside of prison (e.g. home, benefits etc.) and gain access to substances they had not previously.** In addition, as they are not guilty, they can become resentful and this can lead to thoughts of vengeance against the system.
- **The smoking ban in prisons led to the increase in substance misuse, particularly Spice.**
- **There is a lack of cultural and racial awareness when addressing the needs of service users.** This leads to a lack of understanding, stigma and often, conflict.

Outside prisons

- **The impact on, and support for families, is seen as insufficient.**
- **Access to housing is a significant issue.** The group discussed how local authorities define sentencing as making yourself voluntarily homeless and therefore unable to access housing in your local area upon release.
- **Universal credit takes too long to access, often forcing individuals to consider alternative means of accessing cash to survive.**
- **Information is not clear or easily accessible upon release.** Service users lack guidance on available support services and where to access priority needs such as housing, methadone, probation etc. The service user may be unaware of the local area they are released into and



therefore unaware of how and where to access services. The lack of communication between services means that even when appointments are made upon exit they can often clash or be impossible to access due to their location in comparison to other appointments made on the same day.

SOLUTIONS

Essentially, the care pathway should start before prison, continue through sentencing and imprisonment and onto resettlement. It should be multi-agency and the service user should be central in the design of the pathway so that it is person-centered and tailored for them. It should be rehabilitation focused; seek to address the causes of addiction and provide support to access suitable housing, family support, mental health services and employment opportunities.

1. **Peer support.** Provide access to peer support services from mentors to fellowships into prisons.
2. **Pre-emptive relationship building.** Probation to meet and begin to build relationship with service user whilst still in prison.
3. **Staff training.** Train prison staff not only on substances but on the reasons *why* individuals become addicted in the first place.
4. **Support services designed to meet needs and not duplicate provision.** In partnership with point 3, provide appropriate support to address the causes of substance misuse.
5. **Core life skill training within prisons.** Provide every opportunity to rehabilitate someone by offering core life skills in prison: budget management, social skills, information technology, relationship building, cooking etc.
6. **Individual, tailored care support plans that have been co-produced with the service user.** Involve the service user in their care plan whilst in prison and in the design of their exit plan from prison. Ask 'what can we do for you' not 'we are doing this'. These plans should also be multi-agency based.
7. **Provision of a service/support directory.** Provide clear information packs on release that detail local available support and how to access it (transport links, maps, telephone numbers etc.). Consider that the individual may not know the area they are released into. Provide a navigator to support accessing community support services.
8. **Housing support within prisons.** Housing pathways on exit from prison should be followed whilst an individual is still in prison so that it is available on release. Consider using the Housing First approach.
9. **Whole family support provision.** Family counselling and mediation needs to be made available.

Key point: In all of this, the lack of lived experience employed and used within the criminal justice system is seen to be a major contributor to issues recurring. Individuals



with lived experience have a wealth of skills and knowledge and as they have progressed on their own journeys often seek opportunities into employment where they can ‘give back’ and stop the cycle occurring for others. The strict rules and procedures around prison access and employment, particularly the DBS screening service, results in them not being able to access such opportunities. This potential workforce of peer mentors and prison officers would provide the MoJ with the opportunity to remove stigma, ‘us and them’ mentalities and actions and address the core barriers to recovery progression that service users experience. Lived experience brings knowledge, empathy, understanding and the ability to connect – it is seen as critical within the community services available and should therefore extend to within prisons too so that the recovery journey can begin sooner.

