

# ISCRE – HMYOI Warren Hill BME Youth Consultation

July 2013

A report of the consultation with young people at HMYOI Warren Hill conducted by ISCRE on behalf of the Black Training and Enterprise Group in July 2013

The Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG) commissioned the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality (ISCRE) to conduct a consultation with young people serving custodial sentences at HMYOI Warren Hill. HMYOI Warren Hill is a youth offenders' institution situated in Hollesley, Woodbridge, Suffolk housing 66% BME and 34% White British young people.

**DISCUSSION TOPIC: *'What Could Have Been Done To Keep Me Out Of The Criminal Justice System And What Can Be Done To Stop Me Reoffending On My Release?'***

The purpose of the focus group was to inform BTEG's policy briefing paper to the Youth Justice Board on issues around the increase in the proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic young people being held in custody.

**The Questions**

1. What were the biggest influences in your life that led you to Warren Hill?
2. What do you think could have helped you to stay out of the trouble when you were younger?
3. Why do you think there are more young black men getting into trouble?
4. What could be done to help you stay out of trouble?
5. What do you think could be done to make your time at Warren Hill better?
6. Do you feel prepared to stay out of trouble when you leave Warren Hill?
7. What could help you while you are at Warren hill have a better chance of staying out of trouble on your release?

**'What Could Have Been Done To Keep Me Out of the Criminal Justice System and What Can Be Done To Stop Me Reoffending On My Release'**



### **About ISCRE**

The Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality is a Suffolk based charity which helps individuals, organisations, agencies and employers in the statutory, private and voluntary sectors, to understand the extent and nature of discrimination and inequality experienced by individuals and groups in fields such as the criminal justice system, housing, employment, education, health and social care. We aim to encourage organisations to implement policies and practices which eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations.

ISCRE delivers work on equality and diversity in two of Suffolk's offender institutions; HMP Highpoint and HMYOI Warren Hill. ISCRE's work is aimed at improving engagement between prison staff and Black and Minority Ethnic prisoners and reducing incidents of discrimination and perceived discrimination. These factors are known to increase incidences of reoffending both within the prison environment and in the community.

### **About BTEG**

The Black Training and Enterprise Group (**BTEG**) is a national organisation providing a voice to government for black and minority ethnic service providers.

They work to address the over representation of BME (Black & Minority Ethnic) communities in the criminal justice system (CJS), which has been a long standing feature of life in the UK for many young black men.

## The Research

7 young black people aged between 15 and 18 participated in the two 90 minute sessions conducted in the Deben Meeting Room, in a discussion forum. It was important to have the sessions without the presence of HMYOI Warren Hill staff in order to ensure that the young people could open up about any suggestions for improvement they might have for the institution. Phaniel Mutumburi from ISCRE led the discussions with support from Mark Blake of BTEG.

## Responses

The over-riding issue that came out of the forum was that young people from BME backgrounds felt disconnected from mainstream society due to perceived and real stereotyping. This was used to explain some of their criminal behaviour, as an attempt to get back at society or ‘beating the system’

Some of the issues which led the consulted young people to Warren Hill include:

- Boredom
- Criminal activity as a perceived easy way to make money
- The excitement of ‘getting away with it’
- Bad choice of friendships
- Group memberships (gangs)

Most of the young people noted that many influences around them in their communities were negative and there is a significant lack of positive role models or older peers making an enviable living through legitimate means. They pointed out that coming from mostly deprived boroughs of London, there are strong ideologies about criminality, which make it difficult to be ‘legit’. Instead, they find it easier to fit into the social roles predetermined by the ideologies held by themselves and others in environments often isolated from the benefits, life prospects and beliefs of peers from different social classes than them.

One young person said, *'Group thinking tends to take charge where I come from. These groups tend to take the place of what the system (Society) should do and I don't know anyone from my neighbourhood who is on a straight path. It was an already laid out path from school into a gang. No one ever came to us to tell us about alternatives or opportunities available out there. 9-5 is frowned upon. I haven't seen anyone from my area that became successful doing a proper 9-5 job'*. The young people are also conscious of negative stereotyping in interviews and in formal employment. They described cases of family and friends who have struggled to make ends meet despite performing well in school. This appears to dis-incentivise education as the foundation for gainful employment amongst them.

There is widespread lack of appropriate opportunities in the communities in general and more so now since the advent of the economic downturn. The kind of jobs, business and other opportunities that are widely advertised in the media, are rarely suitable for their qualifications, competencies and general abilities.

Help also needs to be given to families who are struggling to support these young people. A lot of them have multiple needs and their families are ill equipped to deal with such needs.

In schools there is usually 'them and us' scenarios amongst peers from different ethnic backgrounds and the young men from BME backgrounds said they felt less part of the school community. They believe the authorities are quick to exclude anyone who behaves differently from the accepted norm, without taking into account the causes for such behaviour.

The quality of legal support and advice accorded to the young people at times leaves a lot to be desired. One young man chronicled a case where a member of the Youth Offending Team felt that he had been badly advised and requested for a different solicitor, appealed his case and got a different and more favourable outcome. Young people have, as a result, started to perceive the entire criminal justice system as acting collectively against them. Another young person asserted that, *'It makes me so angry that petty crimes by young black men seem to be punished severely whilst serious issues like bankers' fraud go unpunished or are given more lenient sentences'*

Participants felt that they could do with better role models both in the community, in schools and in prison. These would be people they can identify with, who have achieved things that they could also reasonably attain, to tell the young people about the journeys they have travelled and how they managed to escape the pitfalls of criminal behaviour.

A clear message from the partakers of this consultation was that more support should come from people that know the challenges that *'we face on a daily basis'*. Messages from people from different circumstances are difficult to accept for the young men who believe that *'a lot of people just say it and they don't mean it and so we never listen to whatever they have to say'*.

The *'will to say no'* to the people around you, especially family and friends encouraging bad behaviour, was highlighted as the most important and useful attribute required to escape criminality.

Whilst the young people agreed that getting a well paid job will help, there is a clear lack of understanding as to how one attains that. It is also evident that there is less willpower to put in the hard work required to do achieve a successful ‘well paid’ career, whereas crime is seen as an ‘easier’ way to earn money. There needs to be alternatives for young men who are not very academic and do not wish to go to college after school.

General sentiment gathered was that the Youth Offending Teams who are supposed to be supporting these young people are sometimes not very helpful. They said, *‘YOTs are good at highlighting what we are doing wrong but not so good when it comes to positive encouragement. They are not very helpful in providing us with practical support’*

Respondents also felt that the prison system does more to punish than it does to support and rehabilitate them. *‘Our prison timetable for education and activities is all over the place. I never know what I am doing from one week to the next, which leaves me confused and sometimes angry’*

The young people generally do not perceive the Release on Temporary Licence programme (ROTL) as an incentive for good behaviour. There is lack of understanding of how the programme is supposed to benefit them. Feedback coming from them is that, *‘going out to pick litter at the beach is not something that we would strive to attain’*. There is clearly lack of understanding of the rules that govern ROTLs. None of the young people participating knew what it took and how long for, for one to be in a position to go out on ROTLs. Some reported to have spent longer on the ‘Gold’ status than others before they became eligible, whilst for some it appeared that they might be ineligible for some reason but this has not been communicated to them. As a result the young people are not trying their best to achieve ROTLs.

The ‘risk levels’ system was also highlighted as unclear to the young people. When one’s risk level is increased for whatever reason, it is unclear what one has to do and

how long before they can be considered low risk. Due to this lack of clarity, perceptions of unfair treatment are arising. The young people feel that the stringent system is precluding them from benefitting from important practical programmes like brick-laying, painting and decorating and motor mechanics, which would be useful should they choose to be self-employed if they left prison with criminal records.

Whilst the education at Warren Hill was roundly commended, some young people felt that those of higher ability were not challenged enough. They felt the process to select which course one could do, is not thorough enough to determine their capabilities. Participants also applauded career guidance support provided at Warren Hill by the Moving-On project. They expressed the willingness to move away from crime if viable alternatives are availed to them but they usually felt 'abandoned' by the system once they leave prison.

When asked, it became apparent that the young men felt excluded when the government does consultations to build sports clubs and other facilities for them in their home areas, resulting in services that do not cater for their specific needs. Young people need more engaging and purposeful activities than just snooker and darts in sports centres.

There is a perception that there is a lot of information available in the community about useful activities that young people could engage in, about career guidance and about productive life outside crime, but it is never appreciated because the BME young men cannot identify with the 'messengers'. Very good information is being 'lost' because whoever is delivering it, is perceived as out of touch with their idiosyncrasies. *"They cannot lecture us, they know nothing about us"*. The same message delivered by someone from a similar background would be better received.

The young people seem quite apprehensive about their future. Whilst most do not wish to return to criminality, they believe they have no way of knowing how things



will pan out in the community. *'I don't want to come back to jail so I will try my best to stay away from trouble, but with a criminal record, who will want to employ me? And without a job, how will I survive?*

## Recommendations

### At HMYOI Warren Hill

Young people should be consulted and involved more in decision making, particularly in development of services and activities that affect them. Such processes usually lead to them taking ownership of the decision making process, ensuring better participation.

The Release on Temporary Licence programme is very useful, not only for preparing young people for re-integration into society upon release, but as a means of them to obtain information on future education, career or volunteering opportunities in the community. These benefits of ROTLs and its eligibility criteria, with all associated complications, need to be explained to the young people, possibly during induction, to ensure better appreciation.

The process of placing young people in appropriate educational classes could do better in identifying those willing and able to learn at higher levels and challenging them to perform to the best of their abilities.

Intense work needs to be done around career planning by engaging in specific personal development planning that captures and nurtures individual interest, ambitions and capabilities.

### In the Community

There is need to devise culturally sensitive systems to involve young people in different areas in development of services specific to their particular needs. What works in West Suffolk might be less appreciated in North London.

Consultations with young people need to involve people they can identify with. It is important to consider some of the perceptions and preconceived notions that the young people have, when devising communications for and engaging with young people. Ex-offenders who are proved to have changed their lives around and role models from the Black and Minority Ethnic communities should play a more significant role in leading the change process for the young men.

Incentivise businesses to employ those young people who have exhibited the willingness to move away from criminality, not as a reward for bad behaviour, but as a way of providing legitimate alternatives to a life of crime. More practical programmes that teach entrepreneurial skills need to be introduced in the community.

The quality of legal advice should be scrutinized to ensure that young people from the BME communities are getting the optimum level of support in instances where they are accused of wrongdoing.

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