



Justice Committee

Oral evidence: [Prisons: planning and policies](#), HC 309

Monday 24 November 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- User Voice [PPP 32](#)

This evidence was taken in private. Text that has been redacted has been replaced by asterisks.

Members present: Sir Alan Beith (Chair); Nick de Bois; Andy McDonald; and John McDonnell.

Questions 255-300

Witnesses: **Douglas, Adellah, Raymond, Daniel**, and **Dwayne**, former prisoners, gave evidence.

Chair: Hello and welcome everybody. We are very grateful to you for coming in and being prepared to talk to us about these issues. It is a real help for us as we try to look for ways in which Governments can use the prison estate better and organise it so that it achieves its intended purpose.

Around the table we have Andy McDonald, who is the Labour MP for Middlesbrough. I am Alan Beith, the Chairman of the Committee. I am a Liberal Democrat MP from the border of England and Scotland. Then we have two of our staff: Gemma Buckland, who is our main research person in this area, and Nick Walker, who is the Clerk to the Committee. Then we have John McDonnell, who is a London area Labour MP.

Although we have your names in front of you, we won't be recording them in the transcript that we have for our own use, and certainly not if we publish the transcript. We will just use first names, so that you feel freer to say whatever you would like to say in response to the issues we raise. Our objective is to be better informed as a result of this session, so we are grateful to you for helping us. I will ask Andy to start.

Q255 Andy McDonald: Good afternoon everybody, and thanks very much for coming along. Could I ask you about the nature of the relationship between prisoners and officers, and how that impacts upon security and safety? Would anybody like to comment on the relationship between prisoners and officers?

Raymond: My name is Raymond. I think the relationship between prisoners and officers has grown a lot better in regard to User Voice, which is a charitable organisation that I work for. There is a lot more communication and understanding. In the past prison officers were more straightforward—doing their job, not really interacting with offenders. Now it is a lot better.

Andy McDonald: Would anybody else like to say anything?

Daniel: It depends what you are doing in the prison for them to interact with you. If you're just an average Joe not doing anything, then your relationship probably won't be very good at all—in fact very minimal. But if you are doing something where you are structured every day, if you've got a cleaning job or any sort of job where you're interacting with the officers, then you are going to have a better relationship and you'll understand more. That's it—it's simple really.

Q256 Andy McDonald: Is there a link, though, between the quality of the relationship and how safe and secure a prison is? If it deteriorates, do problems arise? Do you have some thoughts on that?

Raymond: Certain offenders of a certain mindset will have better relationships with officers. A lot of offenders are still of the mindset that, "It's us against them." It's a bit of divide and conquer. Like I said, at the minute, with regard to my personal experience, I believe that the relationship is now more close and connected. There is a lot more communication, a lot more respect and a lot more intimacy on both sides—not just as an offender but as an officer as well. For you to be able to live and better yourself, I think this is a positive thing.

Q257 Chair: Adellah, is there any difference in a women's prison?

Adellah: In the relationship between the officers and the offenders?

Chair: Yes.

Adellah: As Raymond said, it depends on the mindset on both sides. Some do not care about the individual or the inmate. They are just there to do their job—lock them up or take them to wherever they need to. On the other hand, some are more caring, and they show more empathy and have an open mind.

As for me in a women's prison, I felt that the more I communicated with the officer, they communicated back. The more I showed interest in other things to better myself or to stimulate myself, nine times out of 10 they would show that interest back, but for a person who wasn't so forthcoming or confident in addressing the officers, they would just get lost in the system.

Q258 Andy McDonald: Would there be any consequences if there was a reduction in that contact, that communication? We will hear later that there have obviously been

some significant changes in very recent times. We are trying to explore whether, if there was any reduction in that contact and relationship between officers and prisoners, it would have bad outcomes and whether there would be consequences.

Adellah: If they were to have less contact?

Andy McDonald: Yes.

Adellah: I think it would deteriorate a lot. They need to be more interactive with each other and just to build that relationship with us. There is a relationship there of trust and the officers need to be open-minded about where we're coming from. I think that helps to build something positive.

Chair: We have been joined by Nick de Bois, who is a Conservative MP for a north London area.

Nick de Bois: My apologies for being late, Chair. I did advise the staff.

Q259 Andy McDonald: We saw some prisoners who are listeners and peer mentors. I do not know what your experience is of that. How does that work in terms of getting benefit from those relationships as opposed to direct contact with the professional staff? How does that gel?

Daniel: A lot of prisons do that now. When you go into prison and do an induction, there are a lot of prisoners that are inducting you now. You have one officer that oversees it, but the majority are prisoners. I think that's better, because obviously you can interact with a prisoner better because you're from the same background and you can talk to them. They understand where you're coming from. If you've just come off the road you don't know what's going on, but they're in the system, they know what's going on. With an officer, they don't really know anything like that. They're just there and they just want to get it processed, do you know? I do think that's better, yes.

Adellah: Peer mentors are vital in all areas—very vital—and shouldn't just be looked at as like a helping hand for the officers. They build the bigger picture of rehabilitation as well. When somebody's coming in, if they are taking advice from somebody who's been through the system and come out the other end on a positive and have progressed, then they are more likely to listen and understand and have hope, if that makes sense.

Douglas: I was a listener and part of the safer custody scheme in Stockton for a number of years. I was an inmate as well. It is a service that was required more and more as there were stresses, and they got involved with prisoners as they came under different kinds of stress. Going back to your original question, if you reduce communication between prison officers and the inmates, then you allow rumour, you allow innuendo and you allow lots of things to happen. Reducing the communication is not a good route to go down.

Q260 Andy McDonald: How well do prisons deal with violence? What's been your experience? Has that been dealt with properly and effectively? How well do prisons deal with it when it happens?

Daniel: Because of staffing cuts, now it is not very good. Obviously when it happens now you've got to wait for all the officers to come, and there's not always a lot of officers. Violence does happen and obviously it needs to be acted on better. There was a death the other day of someone I know; they died in prison in a fight. So it does happen. Fighting is quite rife. It depends on the person's mind as well at the end of the day. If they don't really want to get involved then they won't, but other people are different.

Q261 Andy McDonald: It is the response of how the prison deals with it. Dwayne, do you want to say something?

Dwayne: Yes, I was going to say the same. It depends on the staff. If there's not enough staff on the wings, which there's not, especially with the cutting down—there might be two to a wing—it invites more violence to happen. Especially now that they have introduced YOIs into more of an adult prison, they are bringing the violence into it rather than coming and dealing with the problem that they've done. They've got into trouble and have to deal with their problem, but they'll come in and still think it's maybe fun and games. It's two different balances, but it brings a lot of problems as well.

Douglas: There are different kinds of violence. There's the violence of self-harm—that's another part we didn't look at. There is also self-policing. If it's someone who's committed an offence against another inmate, then that can lead to violence between the inmates as retribution, as opposed to violence on a general scale where it is violence against the prison officers themselves.

Raymond: We need peer mentors to help the officers to police the place. Obviously the majority of the prison co-operation is from offenders—it's from prisoners. It is not through any policing; it's because they're of a certain mindset, and they're willing to engage and they're willing to conform to certain rules of the establishment. The peer mentors do help and assist officers with this, so they are very important.

Q262 Andy McDonald: I am just trying to get a sense from you and your experiences as to whether, when violence does kick off, it has been dealt with effectively. There has already been an indication that because of lack of staff, it hasn't. Is that a shared view? Is that a shared experience? Would anybody like to comment?

Raymond: It depends on the establishment as well. I think the establishment itself will play a big part in it. Obviously the officers have a duty of care. It's the intention of the officer, you know? Does he or does she intentionally want to help?

Q263 Andy McDonald: What has been your own experience of seeing these things happen?

Raymond: My own personal experience is that, like I said, there are officers who will turn a blind eye to this. They just want to get paid and go home. They just want to do their job

and go home, and the intention and the duty of care has gone. Like I said, you will get officers who turn a blind eye to it. You will get others who will be a lot more forthright in their work and a lot sterner with their decision making and whatever else, with whatever violation or whatever has been taking place in the establishment.

Q264 Andy McDonald: Finally from me, what do you think about the security categorisations A, B and C? Do you think that works? Are there any problems with those categorisations? What is your experience of that?

Raymond: I am a life-serving prisoner and a reformed offender. For lifers in prison, going through the categories is difficult. As you know, the situation with lifers going to open prisons has now changed. It is not the case that all prisoners can go to open prisons. Certain lifers are not accepted at open prisons; whether it's because they've got absconding on their record or whatever else, they are not accepting them. It's defeating the object because, as a lifer, you need rehabilitation. As a lifer you've usually spent five years plus or over in prison, so you are institutionalised to a certain degree. You need that transition. You need to be able to go through those stages to get to the stage of open prison, to slowly rehabilitate yourself and interact yourself back into society. As you know, it is not an easy process. It is a difficult process, and rehabilitation is solely down to the individual as well.

Adellah: They are encouraging rehabilitation, but they just keep putting up more and more barriers to stop you from actually rehabilitating. That's what it seems like.

Q265 Chair: What sort of barriers are you thinking of?

Adellah: Like we were just talking about.

Raymond: Categorisation.

Adellah: The categorisation. And there's another barrier—I know it's not the topic we are talking about, but it's the same around substance misuse inside as well. It is just barriers after barriers. We're not really coming to any solutions.

Q266 Chair: That leads naturally to what John McDonnell was going to ask.

Douglas: Can I make a point on categorisation, just to finish off? I was Cat C and low risk, and yet it took six months and I had to take it to judicial review to be classified as Cat D. With that went all the expense for legal aid, even to the end, when the documents were given to the governor of the prison for him to appear in [xxx] court to answer the questions and so on. That is a big waste of time and money, and it really comes down to the administration inside not wanting or having the time, or not applying any effort into recategorisation, causing problems for other people.

Q267 Chair: Did you win your case?

Douglas: Yes. Well, the day before the court date I was categorised.

Q268 Andy McDonald: Recategorised?

Douglas: Recategorised, yes.

Q269 John McDonnell: That leads on to the questions that I was going to raise. The Government have been putting a lot of emphasis on work in prisons and getting people to work. There is a view expressed quite consistently now that there is more of an emphasis on security than there is on rehabilitation and allowing people into useful activities. What do you think? Have they got the balance right at the moment? What opportunities did you have for work?

Daniel: I don't think they do enough. All they do in prisons nowadays is education, which is fair enough, and they've got level one of a few things. You've got to remember that these are people coming in off the streets—either drug dealers or criminals that are out there every day. They are put into prison and nothing's getting changed. There are courses, but nothing that's going to deter someone.

If you go into prison and you've got a course in bricklaying or plumbing, or something where you're going to come out of prison with a trade, then the statistics are going to fall a lot because you've got something to come out to, whereas at the moment people are coming out and they've got nothing to go to. They get promised this and that but nothing happens. They go on probation and the statistics are that within three months of coming out they are usually back inside, because there's no change. They have to have something to change.

Q270 John McDonnell: Do you mean they are promised courses?

Daniel: No. In prison you get told, "You can do this, this and this," but when you come out of prison there are waiting lists as long as your arm and it doesn't happen. That's all.

Q271 John McDonnell: The question is, have they got the balance right between security and rehabilitation? Have you had access to the working opportunities that have been set up?

Douglas: Security has the say over everything. If the security department of a prison decides that something is not going to happen, it doesn't happen. If that involves going out to work, if you are in a Cat D where you can go out and work outside, or you go to college, or even if you're doing an internal course in a Cat C type prison—if security decides it's not going to happen, it doesn't happen.

I can give a soft example. I was in prison for three and a half years and I decided to do a degree. I did a degree with the Open university and yet for the first two years the CD that allows you to start the course arrived in time but wasn't cleared by security for three

months, so you can't then start the course. I did in the end, but even with all the complaints system and everything you go through, security just has that final say.

Q272 John McDonnell: Have any of you noticed any changes in terms of the opportunities of doing work or learning or getting ready for release? Have there been increased opportunities recently or less?

Adellah: Very few.

Dwayne: Less.

Daniel: A lot less now.

Adellah: There's nothing really meaningful to do in prison. The qualifications that are available to us are very minimal and you can't really do much with those qualifications.

Q273 Chair: Douglas managed to work for a degree with a lot of difficulty, didn't he?

Adellah: Yes. Not everybody has the same determination, but it needs to be encouraged. It doesn't mean that they don't want to; they just haven't got that confidence, or don't know where to start looking.

Q274 John McDonnell: I think Daniel has answered this. Prisoners seem to be more interested in the employment opportunities than they are in education or training. Is that true?

Adellah: Yes.

Q275 John McDonnell: Why? Do you think it is because they see a job at the end?

Adellah: Definitely. It is profitable opportunities for the prisoners themselves. If it was beneficial to both—the inmates and the facility—then, yes, you've got a balance there. But if it's just solely for profit and we're being used like slave labour, what incentive is that giving the prisoner to start thinking about rehabilitating themselves? I just think it is all one way.

Raymond: A problem that we've found is that when you come out of prison, even though you might have one or two qualifications, you still don't have the actual work experience. This becomes a problem because the employer is going to straight away ask, "All right, you've got this qualification. That means you are qualified to do that, but where is the experience that goes with the work?" It is difficult, so a lot of prisoners get stuck then.

Adellah: Definitely.

Q276 John McDonnell: In preparation for release were any of you transferred to an open prison or did any of you get released on temporary licence? If so, what did you think of the process?

Douglas: I spent 18 months in a Cat D prison after I had spent two years in a Cat C prison. In my opinion, and I have said this many times, the open prison is a fantastic opportunity for rehabilitation. Where I was, after a period of four to six months, you could go out and get a job and work. You had ROTL—release on temporary licence—for the day. I was able to go to [xxxx] college and do a full-time course for a year on computing. It was designed all the time to rehabilitate back into the community. I have said this in many of my answers. I think that the Cat C or Cat D route—that soft landing to being released—is a good way to do it, but when I talk to other people, it doesn't happen as often as it should.

Q277 John McDonnell: Did it happen to you, Raymond? Did you go to an open prison and get a temporary licence?

Raymond: Yes. I had to go through open prison. I spent a good part of two or three years in open prison. I found it very beneficial, but at the same time it couldn't prepare me for the reality of life in society because I had been away for close to a decade. The transition was still a bumpy ride. It still is now. I'm the first to admit that I'm aware that obviously from spending so much time in prison you become institutionalised. The transition now for you to rehabilitate yourself, become the so-called norm and live a normal life in society and be a normal person is not easy and it is a long process, but I had the likes of User Voice to support me in prison and then at the transition point as I came out of prison, right there at the doorstep. They were close at hand; they are always at the end of the phone. These things are imperative. It is all part of the process.

Douglas: There is one other point to what I was saying. I am a firm believer in the Cat D system and it served me very well. It is still up to the prisoners to organise their own life after they leave. There is no help whatsoever. I found that very difficult—not for me personally because I had a good family and so on to come out to—but I chaired the over-55s/getting on for 65 and so on. These were people who had usually been in prison for a long time and who did not understand the changes in the last 10 or 15 years. There was very little help. There was no easy flow from leaving prison to going into the services of the community. I felt that was the one negative point about the Cat D prisons and release.

Q278 Nick de Bois: Douglas, talking about the open prison and the ability to go out and get a job, did you do that? Were you able to find work when you were there?

Douglas: I chose the option of going to college full time.

Q279 Nick de Bois: How many people were able to take advantage of that? Was there help in getting people to do it, or was it purely a self-start initiative?

Douglas: Because of the ROTL system—release on temporary licence for the day—employers had to be vetted. It comes back to security again. When I first went there I would say that probably two thirds of people went out to work on minimum wage or in various occupations. It was not the higher occupations; it would be as a washer-upper in a restaurant, or in some cases it was distribution for frozen foods and that type of thing.

I can't remember the exact timing of it, but then some law or rule came into effect that you had to give back. Up to that point the person could keep all of their wages. That was good because it built up a reserve for when they were released, and they had a cushion at release. At some point in 2012 or 2013—I cannot remember when—the rules were changed whereby a proportion of any money earned had to go to victims. It then dropped from 70% down to 30%.

Q280 Nick de Bois: For people who were going to work out of choice?

Douglas: Yes.

Q281 Nick de Bois: Because they were going to take less back.

Douglas: Also, for example, you were allowed to have a car. By the time you'd bought a car, insured it, paid the petrol to go to where you were going and so on, it came to the point where it wasn't really worth it for individuals to work in certain jobs.

Q282 Chair: Within prisons there is some evidence that prisoners prefer to go to work than education. That might be because they have not had much good experience of education in their earlier life and don't see it as the way for them; or is it influenced by the small pay that you get for the work?

Dwayne: I think it's a bit of both. Sometimes with education, you can't really go higher than a level one unless you were to move to another jail. At some jails you might do a level two, but that's about it basically; you are not going to get higher than that. You're not forced to work, but in order to survive and have money you are pushed towards doing work. Some work jobs are not even work jobs. Things like being a cleaner are essential things that you're meant to do—you're meant to be able to clean your home, so that's not really like a job; that's just natural responsibilities. D Cats definitely put the opportunity out for you to do a bit more, but at the same time it's hard because for any little situation they can take you out of a D Cat. Any mess-ups that happen can upset your whole rehabilitation that you've been trying to build up. It can just be taken away over this one thing that might not even be to do with you; it could just be from hearsay or whatever. It can just be taken away and you don't even go to a C Cat. You go straight back to a B Cat, and then have to start over again. Especially for someone who has done a long term and built up to that, it can just be taken away.

Daniel: People don't really want to do education, because you get paid £4 a week. Nowadays in prisons, because of the regime, you can't do one job full-time unless it is kitchens or wing cleaners. Those are the full-time jobs. With anything else in prisons,

because the regime has split up—I think a lot of prisons are like this—and you can only work part time. There is no point going into education to work for a fiver a week part time, when you could go and work somewhere else for a bit more money. It's not going to be part time; it might be full time. That's the breakdown there.

Q283 Chair: There has been a lot of change in prisons, with new for old and prison closures, as well as the austerity measures, which have cut the funding available to governors to run the prisons with. Have you had a particular impact from any of that? Has a prison closed and brought in different people to your prison, or have you been moved yourself not because you were due for a move but because of changes in the system?

Douglas: My comment is indirect. We were looking at this before. When I was a listener at the prison, other prisons were closed for temporary reasons or whatever, and we had a big influx of prisoners from those other prisons. It was usually done at the last minute and without any organisation. Being a listener or a Samaritan—I do not know whether you understand the term “listener”—you got that first phase of worry. People who arrived didn't know one day where they were going to be; the next day they were in [one city] and their family was in [another city]. I had one particular person: his partner was due to visit him on the weekend, but he couldn't contact her because it takes two or three days for your phone credits to come through. That caused stress and pressure on people and we used to see that. At that time, there was a central bureau that seemed to allocate where everyone went around the country. You could be sent 100 miles away from your family, friends and support.

Q284 Chair: Have any of you had the chance to compare different types of prison—for example, big prisons versus small prisons?

Daniel: Yes. I have been to quite a few prisons. In my personal opinion small prisons are better because there are not as many prisoners, so the staff can take more opportunity to deal with the prisoners. Relationships are better because you've got a smaller crowd. You get out of your cell more. It's different being local from being in London. If something kicks off then the whole jail is closed down—that's it; you don't come out for your phone call or your shower. But if you are in a small jail and something like that happens, it is monitored a lot better, because they don't have so many prisoners to deal with.

Q285 Chair: Raymond, were you trying to come in?

Raymond: I was just going to say something about the new and the old prison system. I think the old prison system was more policed by the staff. The new prison systems now, and the new prisons, are not exactly policed, but the staff are helped a lot more in the sense that it's self-sufficient. A lot of the inmates will help to make sure the establishment runs smoothly. But at the same time this can be detrimental to vulnerable prisoners, because they need a lot of attention and help. Like I said, it will make things like the suicide rate go up, along with various other things. That is the point I wanted to make.

Q286 Chair: What about comparing public sector and private sector prisons? Has anyone experienced both?

Daniel: Not from my own experience, but from what I know private prisons are a lot better than the HMP prisons. For instance, HMPs have the old rules, so if you need something you do it on a bit of paper. With the new ones you can go on a computer and you can order your food and it will come the next day. You can put credit on whenever you want, whereas with the HMP prisons you've got to wait a week to get credit or things like that. Those sorts of things are a little bit better, but I do not know about the way it is run.

Q287 Chair: What about the impact of drugs in the prisons you've been in?

Daniel: There are a lot of drugs in prison.

Adellah: In what sense? Drugs is a big thing.

Q288 Chair: There are two different kinds of impact. There is whether prisoners continue or are drawn into drug habits. There is also the impact of drugs on behaviour within prisons, because it sometimes becomes a source of violence in prisons and there is pressure on debt enforcement leading to violence—that sort of thing.

Adellah: Drugs in prison is a big subject. It is just a big thing all round, isn't it? I have quite a lot to say about that.

Chair: Please do.

Adellah: At the moment I feel there is a problem with how we deal with addiction. I don't have the statistics but a lot of people have addictions inside prison. I feel that we're not really looking—I wrote it down actually.

Chair: Yes, have a look at your notes.

Adellah: It was a good little phrase that I found. I said that we are focusing on maintenance rather than abstinence. We are looking at control rather than being solution based. I feel that addiction is not really being tackled how I would have preferred it to be tackled when I was experiencing that in **HMP [women's prison]**. It is just a strong topic that needs to be addressed in all areas, especially with the amount of substances that are being taken into prison. How is it getting in there? How are we tackling it? There are now legal highs that are available. There is the impact it is having on prisoners and staff. The staff aren't really aware of the legal highs that are available to inmates and how to tackle it. They don't know what the side-effects are. My brother is serving **[a prison sentence]** and he's had to be moved on to a vulnerable prisoners' wing because of the addiction that he's accumulated in this last year.

Q289 Chair: So you are saying that he has actually got worse in prison?

Adellah: Yes, he's got worse.

Q290 John McDonnell: Is that on legal highs?

Adellah: Yes; that is legal. This substance is legal. Like I said, this can turn into a big thing but it is legal. It is causing side-effects that the staff aren't equipped, experienced or trained to recognise. How are we going to go forth to tackle this? It is just going to need more training and awareness—stuff like that really.

Q291 Andy McDonald: I want to take you to the interesting issue of complaints. In terms of prison policy, when people are allowed to do things and all the rest of it, what was the matter that people complained about most regularly?

Adellah: People didn't really like complaining, did they? We felt that complaints weren't really heard. For me personally, I didn't understand about the ombudsman and how that was run. I never really made complaints. Actually, I made two complaints and they were returned to me with a reasonable explanation as to why this happened but did not—

Q292 Andy McDonald: But are there particular issues that are the subject of regular complaints in your experience? What would be the hot topics for complaint in a prison?

Adellah: Perhaps taking so long to come back.

Raymond: Usually property.

Q293 Andy McDonald: What was it about? Was it association time or access to gyms? What would be the thing, in your experience, that—

Dwayne: Apps—applications, so when you are not getting your property. It could be things like not being allowed out for association or showers. Showers are hygienic.

Adellah: Do you understand how the app system works? To ask or apply for anything you have to write an application out to that particular department, and then it goes into an app box. That app box is supposed to be emptied every single night or every morning.

Raymond: Every day.

Chair: We have seen the boxes in prisons, yes.

Adellah: What I experienced is that apps weren't being answered. Whether they just used to chuck them in the bin, I do not know, but they weren't being answered.

Q294 Andy McDonald: We went to one privately run prison recently where the complaints were tracked by computer. They could see they were registered and how they were dealt with. Often people would say, “My complaint hasn’t been dealt with,” and they could say, “Actually, we can track it through.” I don’t know if you necessarily had that experience or other experiences of how complaints were progressed.

Raymond: At the minute, User Voice have a procedure in place in HMP Birmingham. You will have inmates sitting down with staff randomly looking at various applications or complaints, checking them out and deciding whether this was a positive outcome and the outcome that they desired. That way you will get not more desired results but some kind of result. My personal opinion of complaints is that nothing ever used to happen with them. It was just a piece of paper to say, “Yes, this is in place and this is the complaints procedure.” There was never anything positive ever done.

Q295 Andy McDonald: Did you ever escalate that to the Independent Monitoring Board or the Prison and Probations Ombudsman? Douglas, I know that you had your complaint about your DVD.

Raymond: The IMB and prison visitors are not sufficient. With the prison ombudsman you would get a lot more joy and a better result from them than anybody else.

Douglas: If you write to the ombudsman you will invariably get a response—I agree that they do a good job—that says, “You must have gone through all the complaints procedures possible within the prison.” If I remember rightly, it was three levels. To be honest, after about two levels, unless it is something really big—

Chair: You give up.

Douglas: You give up. In my case it was really big and I needed to go that route, but for things such as your association and the gym and so on, after a couple of turns round this complaint procedure, I found that people give up.

Q296 Andy McDonald: What would you change about it? How would you change the system?

Daniel: I think people should be told about it. When you first come into the prison and you’re on induction I think it should be explained to you. “This is how you go about it; this is what you should do.” People don’t really know. And who wants to do a complaint?

Q297 Andy McDonald: This is the existing system.

Daniel: Yes.

Raymond: There are too many flaws in the procedures. Like I said, it is not really a solution; it’s just that some form of explanation is being given as to why your complaint,

whatever it is, has gone that way. There is no real solution being given, so prisoners are sat there, still in the same place.

Q298 Chair: That prompts me to ask about time in cells, especially when recent pressures on staffing have led to many prisoners spending more time in cells. Has that been your experience?

Raymond: Yes.

Douglas: Yes.

Chair: That is pretty general; everybody is nodding.

Adellah: A lot of the operation of the facilities does depend on how many staff you actually have. Even if we were to come up with ideas as to how to occupy the time of the ones behind the doors who are not working or in education, they wouldn't be able to do those activities because there is not enough staff. A lot of it is just all down to staffing.

Douglas: You would get reduced association or reduced time out at weekends because there is not enough staff if someone is on sick or the cover wasn't there.

Raymond: This is very dangerous as well, because you are putting a lot of people at risk. You are putting offenders at risk and you are putting staff at risk.

Q299 John McDonnell: I am interested in some of the things you have mentioned about prisoner involvement. How are you being consulted and are you consulted? Have people been involved in prison councils?

Adellah: That's really good.

Q300 John McDonnell: Is it? You also mentioned peer support and how successful that can be. What other opportunities are there for prisoner involvement in those sorts of activities?

Daniel: I was on a prison council. Before I met User Voice, I had been a prolific offender for the last 15 years. I'd never wanted to change. I liked how I was living although it was bad. I met User Voice in prison and I sort of saw the light—I saw what I could do to change things. Obviously the prison council is good. Now I am doing peer mentoring and I am doing a training course. Having an ex-offender teach an offender not to do something is a lot better than having someone who's read it from a book and done a degree. You need someone with a lot of experience that can actually just go and sit down and say, "Do you know what, mate? I've done all that and it's no good." I think that's a lot better relationship, and it could stop offending.

Raymond: Like I said, I'm a life sentence reformed offender. I was working closely with the prison council while I was incarcerated. At the same time it depends on the offender as

well: he is going to have to want to change; he is going to want to have that desire to change his life around and do something positive with his life. I take inspiration from User Voice and I commend them in all ways. Like I said, they helped me with my transition and they helped me while I was in prison. I was on the prison council, and now I am out I'm volunteering and trying to do some peer mentoring and whatever else. I am along that path. Without organisations like User Voice, you are going to have a lot of problems.

Adellah: Peer mentors, experienced people like ourselves and organisations like User Voice are going to have a massive positive impact even on those who don't appear to want to change. It doesn't mean that they don't want to; it is just that nothing fresh has been given to them and no opportunities have been presented to them. Having a prisoner elected to the council has touched and affected so many different males—we haven't got a female one yet, but it's work in progress. It does give them an incentive; it gives them hope. It gives them a fresh look at how their lives are and could be. It creates opportunities as well.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We are very grateful to you. It has been very helpful for us. We will produce a transcript but we will not identify you by your full names at all. It is mainly for our own benefit, but we will let you know if we decide to print the transcript. It will be on the basis of anonymity, so you will be quite safe there. We really appreciate your help this afternoon. Thank you.