

Report back to The Funding Network

1. Name of your organisation and date funded by TFN:

User Voice
September 2012

2. What does your organisation do?

User Voice Mission: User Voice exists to reduce offending by presenting the voice of the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to decision makers. Its work aims to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience for offenders, better criminal justice services and institutions, and more effective policy.

Who We Are: User Voice was the first user-led charity in the criminal justice system to deliver service user engagement on a national level and remains the market leader, with the largest number of user-led involvement projects and the largest number of current and ex-service users. As such it has significant experience of delivering projects with offenders and ex-offenders, adopting its innovative peer-led approach and currently represents the voices of around 15% criminal justice service users. User Voice was founded by Mark Johnson. Mark is an ex-offender and former drug abuser, best-selling author of *Wasted*, Guardian columnist, London Probation Board member, Ashoka Fellow and Visiting Associate at the University of Durham. Mark's experiences of prison, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and adviser to the Government and the voluntary sector, convinced him of the need for offenders and ex-offenders to play a more prominent role in the design and delivery of criminal justice, in order to develop and co-produce services thereby reducing re-offending.

User Voice is unique because its work is led and delivered by ex-offenders. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers hear their voices. User Voice is well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in crime or who have direct experience of the criminal justice system as offenders and prisoners.

User Voice '*What's Your Story*' youth provision is delivered by people who have experienced the problems we seek to solve. This can be a powerful medium through which barriers are broken down by our experienced and trained youth engagement specialists, and can allow for a bridge between service providers and the hardest to reach service users. We recruit talented and caring staff trained in youth engagement and youth justice practices. Our staff team embody our values as an organisation, are youth centred in their ethos, and are highly effective in their engagement with the hardest to reach and most excluded groups of young people.

3. When was your organisation first established?

User Voice was founded in 2009, received its charitable status in 2010 and has since grown significantly with a nationwide staff team, the majority of which are ex-offenders, working on projects in prisons, probation areas, youth offending teams and other related services.

4. Since receiving funding from TFN how has your organisation changed?

Since receiving funding from TFN, we have expanded our provision with young people significantly and now operating South West, London, Yorkshire and the North West. Some of this work was as a direct result of Youth Reps speaking at the Youth Justice Convention and the positive impact that they had upon delegates attending from around the country. Indirectly this has meant that the number of beneficiaries reached as a result of the project has grown, as we develop the work regionally. An additional 4 excluded youth projects were commissioned, which so far have engaged with over 100 young people, and provided part employment for three ex-offenders.

5. Can you describe/measure the impact that the specific TFN funded project/work has had?

It is important to note that the User Voice model of engaging 'the hardest to reach' does not allow for the 'cherry-picking' of those most articulate or most able to engage. Our aim is offer a platform where the voices of those voices that are not heard via standard consultation mechanisms are heard, and to support and train these young people to be able to articulate their views about services to those who make spending and resource decisions in a way that is equal, co-produced and importantly, solution focussed.

These are young people who face a number of issues in their lives which have included homelessness, substance misuse issues, complex home lives and chaotic childhoods, gang affiliation, and often with numerous criminal convictions.

Previous User Voice projects have demonstrated that for young people engaged, 'being heard' is a hugely empowering process, as is being supported by rehabilitated ex-offenders as positive role models, this is often the beginning of attitudinal change toward their offending behaviour and understanding of their life journeys, and this is why we believe that our work encompasses 'desistance in action'.

User Voice use a method of peer selection and identification to ensure that young people engaged are representative of their peers and bring issues that are relevant and important to their peers. All those engaged with the project had some experience of engagement in local projects and were able to speak on behalf of their peers from their geographical areas in addition to representing the views of the group in specific issue based seminars.

More details of outcomes for individual young people and case studies are contained at the end of this report.

Young people engaged with this project also 'took over' an edition of theRecord, a magazine produced by UNLOCK, the association for reformed ex-offenders. In this edition, young people write frankly and from their perspectives about the varying issues that affect their lives, they also write of how 'being heard' in the Youth Justice convention has affected them positively. A copy of the magazine is sent with this report.

Outputs

1. 17 young people recruited representing 11 different areas in England (Birmingham; Blackburn; Leeds; Rochdale; Newbury & Brixham, Oldham, Torbay) and four London Boroughs (Newham; Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Westminster)
2. The participants were aged between 15 – 18 years and consisted of seven young women and ten young men. Six of African and Caribbean descent; one Asian and ten white (including one from the travelling community).
3. A group of young people from Wales also attended.
4. Six of the group attended last year's convention and supported new participants as Young Leaders.
5. Participants were identified and recruited by User Voice regional youth workers following peer selection

TFN funded 25% of the project. Evidence of success of the session is detailed below in feedback from young people and delegates. Further evidence is of the contribution to culture change within Youth Offending Services nationally in terms of listening to the views of excluded young people.

The following feedback was given by participants at the Service User Involvement Seminar at the end of the session. Participants were asked to think about what they had taken from the session around the subject, and to add any comments regarding general feedback about the session.

- ❖ *“Make sure that views feeding into decision makers are truly representative – This on single issue (offending) definitely, but also how can the great work of User Voice influence mainstream youth councils who have the ear of important senior people and ‘sell’ themselves as representative but they (in my opinion) fail to be truly representative of more difficult to reach young people.”*
- ❖ *“Peer mentoring absolutely. But please be careful that they are not carrying that label forever, Children and Young People first – not offenders”*
- ❖ *“Decision makers in services must take part and persuade others as to the benefits of involving young people more closely in the delivery of services”*
- ❖ *“Interesting to learn about what User Voice do. It’s also amazing to see so many offenders and ex-offenders passionate about making a difference to others who are going through similar situations. Fantastic session, keep up the great work”*
- ❖ *“Thanks. I need to (go) back to my YOT and listen to the young people!” YOT Manager.*
- ❖ *“Young people involved in the recruitment process for Youth Justice staff”*
- ❖ *Strip out the jargon from any literature we provide to any user. Eg, breach letters, order institutions etc”*
- ❖ *Good feedback – Excellent!!!!*
- ❖ *“We need to listen and engage young people in decisions”*
- ❖ *“Great to have Young People here to speak to!”*
- ❖ *“See the power of User Voice. Finally hearing from the young people we spend hours and days talking about. They should be telling us what they need”*
- ❖ *“Always important to hear the will of young people and that will never change”*
- ❖ *“A good understanding of how the important figures see the youth”*
- ❖ *“Language is important – vernacular”*
- ❖ *“It was really good to actually hear from young people themselves. I have been inspired with new ideas on how to make sure young people are heard! Thank you”*
- ❖ *“Peer mentors should be brought in”*
- ❖ *“Excellent content. A shame about the venue, couldn’t hear!”*
- ❖ *“All YOTs need to be made aware of User Voice”*
- ❖ *“Some lively discussions with some fab suggestions on ensuring young people are heard!”*
- ❖ *“The young people are amazing, committed and outstanding, Thank you!!”*
- ❖ *“Thankful that I get to do ‘hands on’ work and don’t get bogged down by paperwork. Young People very inspiring”*

- ❖ *“Really good to hear the voices of young people! We need to listen to them and act!!”*
- ❖ *“Listening to young people’s ideas takes time and effort acting on them to enable change requires even more time, effort and commitment by us all”*
- ❖ *“Young people get listened to more often”*
- ❖ *“More jobs for young people”*
- ❖ *“That young people have the right to have an opinion on what happens to them”*
- ❖ *“Peer mentoring”*
- ❖ *“Design of service has to be balanced, But, going too far either way, loses sight of both y/p and YOTs vision”*
- ❖ *“Must not be token ‘participation’ and must not avoid responsibility to deliver to meet need”*
- ❖ *“The most energetic excited session of the convention”*
- ❖ *“I will take User Voice forward to hopefully implement in my YOS”*
- ❖ *“Listen to the young people and come to a decision together not alone, compromise”*
- ❖ *“Let’s get more conversations like these going”*
- ❖ *“Meeting new people, having the chance to hear people’s views on different things”*
- ❖ *“Good to be able see benefit of consulting young people to come together to share experience”*
- ❖ *“Great to see such enthusiasm in the room”*
- ❖ *“I would like to see User Voice being funded to enable and give these young people who are with User Voice (here at this seminar and all they work with) to take programmes into prisons and empower the young offenders to have a voice and begin the process of self-empowerment. And the peer mentors of UV to be well paid for their work in doing this. They are amazing young people – authentic and leaders.”*

Young People’s Involvement Feedback

Below feedback from young people following their experiences of involvement at the Youth Justice Convention 2012

“I’m really excited of what could come out of this day! I wanna make User Voice a worldwide thing! That EVERYONE KNOWS about! We really could go far with the right funding”
Female, 16, Tower Hamlets

“I loved it!”
Female, 16, Leeds

"Today was great, I think people really listened, and it shows that we need to part of the solution"
Male, 18, Torbay

"Today was alright still, I never thought I would stood up in front of those people and been able to say my thoughts and people seemed to listen and kept coming up to me after saying how well I had done!"
Male, 17, Southwark

"I love being part of User Voice"
Female, 16, Blackburn

"It was really good. I felt like I could do it for good, and I'm making all the people that I know proud of me...I'm making a change for the better and I could do it as a job."
Male, 18, Bradford

"I'm so glad I done it again this year, was amazing to be honest. Words can't describe how amazing it was and how fab people were! Just mind-blowing!"
Female, 17, Newbury

6. Could you give us an estimate of how many people have been reached by the TFN funded project/work and by how much?

This is very hard to estimate, there were over 100 delegates at the convention and 17 young people took part in the following ways:

1. Providing a young person to co-chair the Convention
2. Delivering a user participation workshop to enable young people to engage equally and meaningfully with decision makers from around the country.
3. Training and attendance of 17 Youth Reps from User Voice across 11 Geographical Areas
4. Providing trained Youth Reps for professionals' plenary sessions on a number of issue based topics.
5. Creating a photographic slide show portraying young people's everyday lives to be shown at the convention
6. In addition, young people asked that they may be able to mingle with delegates as Young Researchers to support discussion on a one to basis with delegates about how they involve young people in the design of their services.

Many of those young people continue as youth reps in their regional areas inspiring other excluded young people to be involved. See comments below (question 8) as they reflect back on the experience.

7. Did receiving the money from TFN make positive difference to your organisation? If yes, in what way? If no, please specify why not?

It made a positive difference to allow us to reach delegates at the seminar and to have a positive impact individually on young people that took part. In terms of our organisation, it allowed us to live our values and ensure that the voice of those most marginalised is heard by decision makers.

8. Do you have any other comments regarding TFN funding?

We are now trying to fundraise to train and prepare young people to take to the 2013 YJ Convention and we'd be pleased to know if we could re-apply for funding. We recently asked the young people that attended to reflect back on the experience and their comments are below.

...Yes I would absolutely love to go there again this year simply because before I went there I never had my word put across about how the system fails youngsters like me .. Secondly I feel since been in touch with User Voice and the whole YJB thing, things are beginning to change.

...Yea I would defo go again! I met loads of new people and I felt like I was a part of something that was making a change for every teenager in the UK. It changes you as a person you feel like you can make a big change.

...I would love to go to the YJB this year as I love trying to help change their opinions on youth of today. I really enjoyed last year and the year before. Going to the YJB has made me feel more confident talking to professionals and I felt good as I was able to voice my opinions to people in very high places and finally the thing that stood out the most for me was that they actually listened to what everyone was saying and took everything on board.

...I would love to come back to the YJB as there is still a lot more to be improved in the justice system and attending the YJB has meant a lot to me because it has gave me so much confidence and the fact that we are making a change in the justice system is amazing!

...The first reason I'd return is to pass my knowledge to the youth of today and help them as much as I can. Secondly with the YJB it helped me find my feet, open my eyes to the bigger picture that there's more to life then offending. I would love to attend the next one to show how I've came on since the last one, also to put across more than I did last time... I would over the moon to attend the next one as I've made so much progress and stuck to it, it's been hard my journey, but like yourself I'm here to tell the tale and to fill the generation next in lines heads with positive attitude and charisma..

The opportunity to get my voice heard by people who makes the big decisions in our society...It's meant a lot to me for my voice to be heard and to feel like a person not a number, the thing that stood out most is when we visited the House of Lords and actually spoke to real government

I would like to return because making a difference to how the YJB works with you guys, it's a great opportunity...

To meet the people that are doing their roll in up-keeping the law and to guide them into what areas youths need more help in to stay out of trouble. That I was one a crook, n I'm not now, I can tell my side of it without people looking down at me.

9. Can you please include any relevant photos or clips that may relate to the project.

Case Study

I first started getting into trouble when I was 13 years old. After something happened at age 15, I started skipping school and drinking heavily, I managed to do my GCSE's but didn't do well.

Arguments at home became worse; I ran off to London and was homeless on the streets of Peckham, it was scary but I didn't have any choice. Some nights I slept in a bus stop, I stole food and clothes; I had no money to live.

I got into trouble with the police again and was on remand for 5 days until my court date. I ended up in trouble again for fighting and got another 4 months referral order. The YOT helped me with the trauma I went through in London and I went on an anger management course.

I've changed my life around and I haven't been in trouble with the police for over a year. I'm running a dance project and my aim is to get youths of the street and not to offend. I also recently passed a Level 2 Leadership Skills course a few months ago. I'm working with my local YOT now, attending loads of big meetings and representing young people.



I attended the National Youth Justice Convention in 2011 in Brighton and the 2012 convention in Birmingham recently. People really listened to us about what we'd like to change about youth justice. It was a really good experience and I would do it all over again! This is thanks to User Voice; they have made a massive impact in my life by giving me the opportunity to do amazing things and for my voice to be heard.

I'm hoping to become a YOT worker at my local YOT as I really enjoy talking to young people who have been in the same kind of situation as me.

Female, (18 years old), attended YJ Convention with User Voice 2011 and 2012