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'Beyond the Gate': A resource for release planning

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Background

Individuals released from prison encounter a number of challenges upon release. These challenges revolve around structural barriers (Harris, 2011), such as employment, stable housing, pro-social contacts and health (Gålander, 2019; Maruna and Mann, 2019), in addition to issues regarding social capital (Moore and Recker, 2013) and personal agency (Doekhie, Dirkzwager and Nieuwbeerta, 2017; Lloyd and Serin, 2012). People previously engaged in criminalized lifestyles rarely have any of these things, meaning a lot needs to be done as people embark on their desistance journey (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Harris, 2011). This magazine provides an important service to individuals therefore, as it addresses the issues of desistance and resettlement presented above and provides important contacts which may assist individuals on their desistance journey.

Introduction

This evaluation reports from a mixed methods approach comprising of both questionnaires and interviews with individuals in prison, family members/significant others of individuals in prison, staff members and the Beyond the Gate team. The aim of this project was to gather views on the Beyond the Gate magazine which aspires to raise awareness of organisations/services that link into resettlement, whilst also publishing real resettlement experiences/stories to inspire individuals within prison. The magazine was piloted at HMP Liverpool from 2020-early 2022. This prison was chosen as a pilot due to the ongoing support provided to the Team during the process of creating the magazine. The aspiration is that the magazine will be rolled out nationally to all prisons within England and Wales. The research team became involved in the evaluation process mid-2020 until the end of 2022.



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The evaluation's purpose is to help the magazine creators develop the magazine in accordance with the views of the readers (individuals in prison), to enable the magazine to reach the audience better, encompassing more of what the individuals within prison want and need within any future editions. This will allow potential future editions to be tailored to individuals in prison, therefore making it more accessible to the wider prison estate.

About the Magazine: 'Beyond the Gate'

The idea for the magazine was generated by the editor whilst they themselves were serving a prison sentence. The voices of those with lived experience are incredibly important within Criminal Justice and are rightly becoming more prominent within Criminal Justice policy. The approach taken by the magazine could therefore be seen as contributing to this increase in voices of those with lived experience. The Beyond the Gate magazine was intended to replace the various information sheets provided in the prison by compiling this information into a magazine format, to replicate the experience of reading a magazine, which is a very popular resource within prison. Having prior experience in prison, the editor felt it was important to have this magazine in a physical format rather than virtual format, due to people in prison not having enough time on the kiosk to appreciate this resource fully. This was also reported during the research by participants, who expressed a real interest in written material.

The magazine is presented on glossy pages, which include pages of advertisements and support charities which may be beneficial to individuals both whilst they are in prison and when they leave prison. The magazine is extremely colourful and includes a wide variety

of images to ensure it is inclusive to all individuals in prison, especially those who may have reading difficulties. The content of the magazine includes prison specific and generic service information, personal stories of individuals who have been released from prison and charitable/support contacts which may be of use to individuals. The magazine is aimed at all individuals within prison and is distributed within the first-night pack when an individual enters prison. An obstacle in the magazine's journey has been the issue of funding. The publisher described COVID as playing a big role in the challenge of funding as when COVID hit, all service providers and marketing spends were instantly pulled. Fortunately, the governor at HMP Liverpool helped to secure the money to pilot the first edition. The Beyond the Gate team produced the magazine free of charge to the prison and the sponsors.

Findings

General Magazine Awareness

Individuals within prison all agreed that the magazine was a good idea, with terms such as "practical" being used to describe the magazine, along with the idea that the magazine was "useful to keep going back to" (Individual within prison). Prison staff also agreed with this. All interviewees mentioned how they thought the magazine was a particularly good idea for individuals entering prison for the first time, stating it is "perfect for someone who has no idea of what to expect from prison life" (Individual in prison). The majority of individuals in prison were however not aware of the magazine or the material presented within it. The awareness of the magazine was more prevalent with prison staff, with the majority having seen the magazine before.

The purpose of the magazine was understood as being to "provide information" (Individual in prison) for the majority of interviewees, with the magazine being referred to as an "essential guide" (Individual in prison). The magazine was viewed as providing information which individuals believed was essential to know and prevented individuals feeling "confused and not in the know" (Individual in prison). Individuals in prison also stated how they believed the purpose of the magazine was to: "provide support for inmates" whilst staff members listed differing purposes such as "to reassure inmates", "to show people they are not alone" and "to inform and inspire".

Design

Generally, the interviewees response to Design was overwhelmingly positive. Interviewees spoke positively regarding the use of colour, using words such as "eye-catching", "positive" and "inviting" to describe this. This use of colour was alluded to in relation to the magazine not feeling like a typical prison publication. Colour was revealed to be something not often used within the prison but was advocated for.

Not typical of your usual prison service publication, which would normally be something that's photocopied a million times and looks a bit tatty (Prison Worker)

The magazine was also praised in relation to its size. A prison worker commented how it "should not be any smaller...any smaller it would be thrown in the bin". Individuals within prison also appreciated the size of the magazine, "it is an ideal size...can't get lost or mixed up in paper". A criticism of the design was the writing style, with individuals with literacy issues potentially finding the large sections of text and wording of the information difficult to read. The writing style

should be revised with 'plain English' being utilised more. Additionally, interviewees commented on the amount of writing, suggesting it was too much for the individuals within prison. Therefore, a suggestion from interviewees was to use less text on each page and to adopt chunking pieces of information to break the pages up.

Content

The magazine content was described as creating optimism in people regarding their futures and providing "a bit of hope" (Individual in prison). This is in reference to the personal stories included in the magazine, which are described as "inspiring people" (Individual in prison) and showing how being in prison "is not the end of the world" (Prison Worker). The content was praised for informing readers of what they need to know about prison in a clear and informative way. This information is specific to HMP Liverpool which was appreciated by interviewees, as it allowed individuals to understand specific rules/regulations. This practical information was the individuals' favourite content and was only described in positive tones. Although being a success, personal stories were also criticised: "this is fake, I've heard this story enough times" (Individual in prison). This lack of realism was mentioned by a number of individuals who suggested a need for a wider variety of unpredictable stories. One suggestion was for stories to focus on the realities and challenges of drugs as a lot of people are now "desensitised to this".

The content of the magazine was further criticised for the number of adverts used. One individual in prison described this as being similar to "the back pages of the echo", with advertisements dominating the magazine.

Lessons learnt from the evaluation

The importance of the impact the magazine could have on individuals in prisons' support network cannot be disputed, with individuals and staff alike mentioning how the magazine would be useful for loved ones as it would help to answer questions and reassure them. One staff member suggested placing the magazine in the family visit centre whilst another suggesting using it in the family forums ran within the prison. Individuals within prison commented mainly on how the magazine helped to alleviate anxiety regarding the unknown of prison life. It was clear that this magazine would be useful for those serving their first prison sentence and could help to answer questions they may have, which they may have been too intimidated to ask otherwise. Having the information presented clearly is described as extremely helpful and a way to remove unnecessary added stressors.

Concluding comments

It was clear from the evaluation that there was a real appetite for the Beyond the Gate magazine to be embedded into prison life. The potential for the magazine was highlighted by both individuals and staff who could name multiple purposes for the magazine both within prison and outside of prison. Recommendations were provided to the team based on the findings of the evaluation. These included: a need for a continued research project on the initiative, a more in-depth analysis on the design of the magazine, more diverse, authentic and local stories to be included and for the accessibility of the magazine to be considered. If recommendations are acted upon, the magazine has the capacity to be uniquely impactful for individuals within prison and their desistance journey, whilst simultaneously providing a unique learning resource to staff. There were plans to roll out the magazine nationally, however this plan was stalled due to financial contributions as a result of COVID. It is hoped this issue will be rectified shortly to enable the magazine roll-out to be permitted.

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