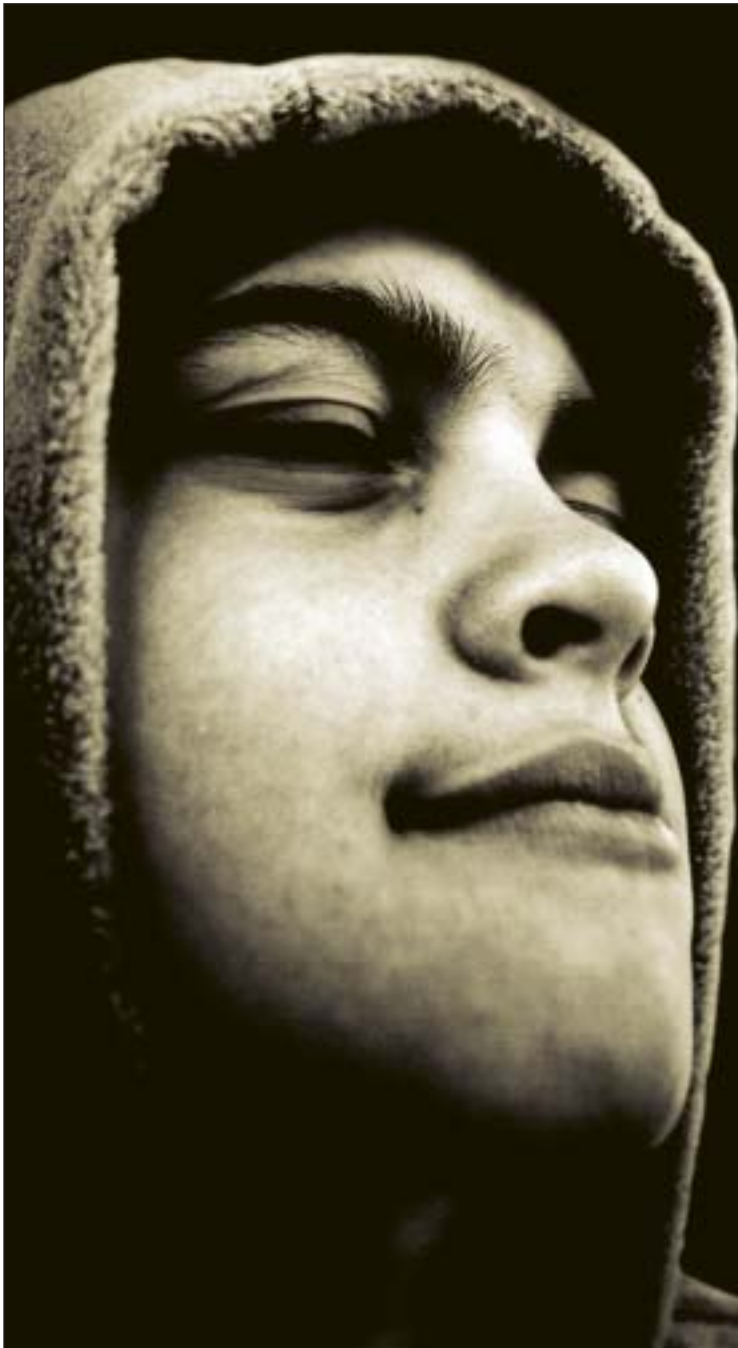


Rapper's delight

Brinsford Young Offenders Institute is home to many young men who've been immersed in drug and gang culture from an early age. **David Gilliver** hears how the prison's substance misuse service is helping them realise that this doesn't have to be their only option.



Some crackhead, if you get an eighth, will kiss your feet for that in my area. An eightball. They don't care – a life for a stone, you get me? Everybody wants to be in a gang.'

These are the words of a 17-year-old rapper. Not so different from many an interview with young rap artists keen to stress their 'street' credentials, whether real or invented, you might think. Except that in this case both the interviewee and interviewer are prisoners serving sentences of four years upwards at Brinsford Young Offenders Institute (YOI) in Wolverhampton, and the experiences being discussed are very real.

The interview is part of work carried out by the Young People's Substance Misuse Service (YPSMS) at Brinsford. Earlier this year the head of the YPSMS, Karen Bourne, set a project brief for some of the young people called 'what drugs and alcohol mean to me'. Part of that project saw the rapper deliver a performance based on his experiences of drug and gang life to an audience of both prisoners and staff – a fellow prisoner interviewed him and another reviewed the performance, all designed to encourage the young people to talk openly about their experiences, and their attitudes towards them, with others.

INTERVIEWER – what do you think about drugs, what experiences have you had?

RAP ARTIST – I've not smoked, like, hard drugs, but I've seen the older people cooking crack to sell. Watching, sitting in crack houses, you get me?

INTERVIEWER – Yeah, you've seen it – what about your mates?

RAP ARTIST – It's one of those things... if you're not a mum or a dad you're a dealer or robber, you get me?

Breaking laws in my area is normal, you get me? Lots of crack in my area then – I was 12 and into bud. You get told 'buy an eighth, sell it and keep the profits', then a quarter, then crack and heroin on the streets. People fighting for profits – if there's a crackhead everyone wants to sell to him.

'We do a great deal of one-to-one work and workshops but the boys enjoy learning from their peers, and they like different media so we try and do as many different things as we can,' says Karen Bourne. 'We have an excellent art and music department here, through Derby College, so with their help I set the brief.'

The YPSMS is a dedicated service for 15 to 18-year-olds within the prison estate. 'You'll find a dedicated YPSMS team at any prison that has young people,' says Bourne. 'We deal with every single young person that comes through Brinsford.'

Brinsford is a split site, with one side for 15 to 18-year-olds and the other for 18 to 21-year-olds. It also takes remand prisoners, those awaiting court appearances or sentencing and those serving detention orders. 'We work with absolutely everybody as a matter of course,' she says. 'We'll do an initial assessment within five working days – generally within 48 hours – so we can start working with them straight away. Within ten working days they have a full assessment and a care plan that we'll use with them throughout their time in custody. We prioritise work with the remanded young people immediately to address their needs as they may not be with us for long.'

According to the prison's latest needs assessment figures, 95 per cent of the young people in Brinsford

'Some crackhead, if you get an eighth, will kiss your feet for that in my area. An eightball. They don't care - a life for a stone, you get me? Everybody wants to be in a gang.'

have said that they use or misuse alcohol, 94 per cent cannabis, and two per cent have gone through a detoxification regime in the last six months. In terms of polydrug use, 88 per cent say that they regularly use or misuse two substances at any one time, 35 per cent three, 10 per cent five and 6 per cent eight. 'We deal with all substances from smoking to ketamine and GHB, to the boys that come to us with heroin and crack cocaine addiction - we offer the same as community services,' says Bourne.

Services like basic education, learning support for those with literacy problems, cannabis and alcohol awareness, overdose prevention and auricular acupuncture are delivered in groups, but everything else is done on a one to one basis. 'Every young person will be seen a minimum of once a month but a lot need far more contact and support than that,' she says. 'Some of the more chaotic boys are seen as often as they need in a month.'

'Pretty much from the day they come to us we start working on their resettlement into the community,' she continues. 'We stabilise them while they're with us and then we start planning for their release. Those we have a specific release date for we'll set up with a community drug worker, or one that's attached to the youth offending services if they're serving licence conditions. We'll make sure they get an appointment within a couple of days of their release.'

The service ensures that those that have been prescribed a clinical regime for either methadone or subutex have a prescription appointment on the first or second day of release so that their script will continue without interruption. This is done through the service's

healthcare partner, South Staffordshire PCT. 'We work through everything on a personal level,' says Bourne, 'their coping strategies and triggers, peer pressure, and we start helping them plan for when they're released. We're in a very good position to signpost them to other agencies and make sure their needs are met.'

Peer support is integral to the groups work, with all of the prisoners encouraged to talk to people who have already been through the service. 'The local DAT is also very keen to support the work we do here,' she says.

'Since the performance we've found the young people becoming more engaged,' says Bourne. 'Others have asked whether they can submit work about their own experiences. They really enjoyed it and a lot of them tell me on the wings that they've done a poem or a song - it's really opened their eyes that it doesn't have to be boring. They want to get involved - a lot of them are very, very talented. It helps them reflect on what they're doing, and it's a language that's relevant to them.'

But surely there was a measure of cynicism from some of the other prisoners? 'Initially yes,' says Bourne, 'because we started off with songs from the charts and things like that and you could see some of them laughing. But as soon as they started rapping about substance misuse the other young people were absolutely mesmerised - they really got into it and gave a huge round of applause. The staff were very impressed - prison officers, teachers and even the governor came to watch. We've got a lot of people wanting to join the music and art departments now.'

The follow-on interview and review were discussed in forums with the

young people, and the plan now is not only to put on a bigger performance, inviting parents, carers and youth offending staff, but also to stage some theatre work. A DVD of young people talking about how they came into custody, their experiences, and how they engaged with the services is also planned, funding permitting.

'There aren't a lot of published packages that are age appropriate,' says Bourne. 'We found that there are a lot for adults, or for middle school age children, but not really for the 15 to 18-year-old category, so that would be a really useful tool.'

'At Brinsford we have a whole prison approach to the young people in our care that includes prison officers, healthcare and teachers. We get a lot of information from the young people so we do a great deal of referring into education, accommodation services, psychology and various other areas. They're relaxed when they speak to us because we're a confidential service. They respect that.'

INTERVIEWER - what about when drugs do stuff to people like those close to you?

RAP ARTIST - yeah man, a friend and my brother died... I came out of jail on bail for this charge and we went to a fair... some gang of lads said to my brethren "you got bud?" He said yeah and they were smoking with us, then they gave us some dirty weed, they wanted more of ours and I said no...

INTERVIEWER - how old were you?

RAP ARTIST - 15 you get me? I was at a mike spitting lyrics half an hour later when I saw people running, saw my brethren holding his chest and head... we got in cars and left. I was in a car behind my mate... we stopped after a few minutes and when I got

there my other mates were all standing around the car... my brethren was dead...

INTERVIEWER - what happened?

RAP ARTIST - he'd been stabbed... punctured his lung... my first day out and my brethren died you get me? But at least he died with a spliff in his hand - happy you know? But he had a girl and a kid...

INTERVIEWER - so the girl's got no man and the kid's got no dad... that's drugs man...

RAP ARTIST - I used to think about revenge, but I realise I got my life ahead of me...

INTERVIEWER - and you can have one.

Reaction from the floor... Another young prisoner gives his reaction to the rap performance

The rap artist then did a rap about drugs. I feel that he spoke the truth and I noticed that some people were taking note of what he was saying and they understood the lyrics. We got to know about his life and lifestyle from what he saying. I feel that he tried to cover all areas of drug awareness so that he could reach as many people as possible and more people could relate to the messages he was putting across.

I think this should be done again, on a regular basis do more people can get involved. It raised awareness of important issues. Only one landing saw this presentation but hopefully in the future everybody will be given the opportunity to experience it.