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## **HMP Norwich Dialogue Group Evaluation: Six Month Report for the Dialogue Trust**

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# HMP Norwich Dialogue Trust Evaluation

## Six Month Report



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## INTRODUCTION

The Dialogue Trust has been running groups in HMP Norwich for the past six months. These groups are facilitated by two trained group facilitators and consist, on average, of approximately twelve to fifteen prisoners each week as well as three volunteers from the community. The groups are intended to reduce the social barriers between prisoners, prison staff and people from the wider community, in the following ways:

- Give prisoners a ‘voice’ to allow them to express their thoughts and emotions. People in prison are excluded from society but many prisoners also come from socially excluded sections of the community. This leads to feelings of being unheard, worthless and uncared for by the outside world. The isolation from society during imprisonment can reinforce these feelings. The dialogue group aims to counteract this by providing a forum where all individuals are encouraged to express themselves openly in the knowledge that each person will be listened to equally, in a respectful and non-judgement way.
- Increase participants’ feelings of being accepted as part of a community both within prison and in the communities outside of prison. Prisoners’ experiences of social exclusion can generate anger and frustration which is frequently acted out through criminal behaviour. The dialogue group delivers an experience of integration through the involvement of volunteers from the outside community. It can thus lead to a sense of greater inclusiveness and purpose within society as a whole.
- Help to break down the ‘us and them’ situations in prisons and in the outside communities. In a dialogue group, everyone has an equal voice, irrespective of whether they are a prisoner, volunteer or a member of prison staff. This promotes feelings of equivalence and encourages shared experiences of a more positive and empowering nature. This is very different to the general prison experience where power differentials exist which can distort prisoners’ perceptions of even the most basic interactions between them and staff, and also with other prisoners. In the community, offenders are often perceived to be of low status, which offenders tend to internalise.
- Enable participants to perceive their common humanity. When non-offenders are perceived fundamentally as being different to offenders, prisoners will have few qualms about committing offences against them on release. The Dialogue Trust believes that prisoners who come to see themselves more akin to volunteers and prison staff than dissimilar, sharing common goals and experiencing similar feelings to situations in life, the less likely they will be to commit offences against other ‘ordinary’ people on release.
- Assist in the development of social skills. A major problem for many prisoners is that they feel unable to interact with ‘straight-goers’ giving rise to the feeling that they have no place in the world. Participating regularly in dialogue groups encourages prisoners to practise communicating with others within a supportive environment. This can help them to develop the social skills they need to feel more at ease when mixing with people in all walks of life. In

rehabilitative terms, more importantly, it has the potential to extend their options beyond criminality in the longer term.

In addition, these groups are intended to encourage prisoners to slow down and think through their responses to other people as well as to encourage prisoners to consider the consequences of their actions.

The present research was commissioned partially in order to determine if participation in the group helped prisoners in these or other ways on a week-by-week basis. In addition, we have set out to better understand why some of the weekly meetings succeed in achieving the above goals whilst others do not. The goal is to better understand not only if the Dialogue process “works”, but also more importantly how and why it works, for whom, under what circumstances (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

This report sets out the findings from the first six months of the intervention, and suggests new directions for the continuation of the work, including a potential role for further evaluation. The report is in seven sections:

- Setting the Scene
- Research Design and Methodology
- Overall Findings
- Week by Week Comparisons
- When Dialogue Breaks Down
- When Dialogue Works
- Conclusions and Next Steps

These sections reflect the overarching intention to understand not just whether the Dialogue process is effective or not, but also how, when and why it is most effective or ineffective.

## *SETTING THE SCENE*

Before discussing the evaluation of Dialogue group, it would be useful to describe the setting in which the Dialogue group operated.

HMP Norwich was originally opened in 1887 and is a multifunctional Male Adult Prison. It has an operational capacity of 760 prisoners and accepts convicted Category B and C male adult prisoners and male adult remand prisoners. The regime at Norwich prison includes education, workshops, gymnasium and sports, chaplaincy, healthcare centre and a drugs programme. HMP Norwich consists of five wings, labelled A, B, C, E and M. A and E wings operate as a local prison for Category B prisoners from Norfolk and Suffolk, while B and C wings are designated as training units for Category C prisoners. B and C wings were originally opened in 1996 and for this reason the cells in Band C wings are quite clean and modern. In contrast, A wing is an old run down Victorian building with smaller, dirtier cells and inadequate plumbing. Recently however, HMP Norwich has changed the organisation of the prison by moving the remand prisoners who were on A wing to B and C wing. As a result of this, the Category C prisoners who were living on B and C wing have been moved to A wing. As the category C prisoners participated in the Dialogue group, the Dialogue group was also moved to A wing.

During the course of the research, the Dialogue group were moved twice. Initially, the Dialogue group were moved from one room on B wing to another much smaller, less comfortable room on B wing with numerous broken chairs. The Dialogue group were told that they had to move from this room to make way for the Addiction treatment course, which needed to use that room at the same time as the Dialogue group. The second time the Dialogue group were required to move was because of the reorganisation of the prison. The prison had moved the majority of the Category C prisoners from B and C wings to A wing and as the majority of prisoners who attended the Dialogue group had been moved to A wing, the Dialogue group was required to move to A wing as well. The room in A wing was larger than the second room in B wing but not as large, clean or as comfortable as the original room in B wing.

### *I. About the Prisoners*

On average, approximately twelve males aged between 20-55 years attended the Dialogue group through-out the course of the research. The race of the prisoners was mainly white but there was also a consistent black minority. Most of these males had served time at numerous other prisons and had already served the majority of their sentence. The majority of those prisoners who did attend the group were close to the end of their sentence with only a few of weeks left to serve. This resulted in a fast turnover in the group membership. Some of the common reasons given for coming to take part in the Dialogue group included curiousness, recommendation by a friend, to get out of their cells, and to be able to talk about certain topics without fear of being beaten up or isolated.

“At first it was just to get out of my cell, to tell you the truth but then we went into the first group and I thought yeah this is good.....it’s good. You get to

meet people from different walks of life and I like the arguments. It's important to be able to argue...you do that and you feel like a sane man"

"My mate x turned around and said why don't you come to it and I said I'm not really sure about it. I asked him what it was about and the way that he explained it to me was, you were free to chat and say whatever you want. I thought he was kidding so I thought I would come along and see for myself and it was. I thought, this is good"

"Listening to other people. Talking about an issue and not having to worry about someone putting it on you"

## *II. What the Prisoners expected*

Many of the prisoners had no expectations about what to expect from the Dialogue group. Some prisoners thought that it would be a religious group while others thought that it would be boring with set topics that they had to talk about.

"I don't know, to tell you the truth I thought it was going to be some holy Joe thing"

"I didn't really think about it.....I don't know, just something interesting"

"I thought it would be about set subjects but it's not. It's about whatever you want to talk about and that's the way it should be"

"To be honest, I thought it would a bit boring, just sitting in a room talking. I didn't think you could talk about anything.....I enjoyed it"

When the prisoners spoke about what they hoped to get out of the experience of coming to Dialogue groups, their answers included: to gain a different perspective on their problems, something to do on a Monday afternoon, to boost their confidence, and to discuss things on their mind.

"To discuss things on my mind and get other people's views on things"

"Something to do on a Monday afternoon and talk to normal people"

"Respect for what other people say"

"A different insight into different people.....if you got a problem and talk to someone else about it and get more than one, two or three opinions.....you get a different insight and think well if I had done it this way or that way then maybe I wouldn't be in this situation now"

### *III. What happens in the Dialogue group*

The Dialogue group was generally facilitated by the same two trained facilitators and on average two volunteers from the community attended the group each week. The majority of the volunteers were women ranging in age from 23-65 years. The facilitators also encouraged prison staff to partake in the groups. One prison officer did briefly attend a group meeting on one occasion but unfortunately, it was impossible for prison staff to attend at other times and an entire group due to staff shortages. The facilitators and volunteers usually entered the room in which the Dialogue group was being held at approximately 1.55pm. This gave the volunteers and facilitators five minutes in which to organise the chairs in the room into a circle so that each member of the group could see the other members. The facilitators and volunteers would then sit down in such a way as to leave an empty seat at either side of them for a prisoner to sit down.

At the beginning of each group, one of the facilitators would welcome everyone and thank them for coming. The facilitator would then proceed to pass on any apologies for anyone who was unable to attend the group that day. If there were any new members to the group, a facilitator would then ask everyone to go around the circle and say their name so that the new members of the group would feel included. After this, one of the facilitators would explain the concept of 'one voice' to the new members of the group. 'One voice' referred to the dialogue group's ground rule that only one person should speak at any one time. If participants wanted to say something then they had to wait until the person speaking had either taken a break from what they were saying or until they had finished speaking. After the initial name round, a facilitator would ask the group if anyone had anything they wished to talk about and from this the dialogue would begin.

## RESEARCH DESIGN and METHODOLOGY

The present research design originally consisted of pre and post interviews, field-based observations and questionnaires. The field-based observations began on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003 and lasted until June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The pre and post interviews and questionnaires did not begin until December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003 as ethical clearance was not obtained from the Prison Service until this time. After eight weeks of participant-observation, it was decided that a traditional individual-level evaluation (pre-test, post-test, etc) design was inappropriate due to the nature of the Dialogue process and the shifting and transient nature of the participant group. Some prisoners only participated in one or two weeks of the Dialogue group; others stayed longer and then left abruptly for a variety of reasons (transfer, release, etc); others participated in a sporadic fashion. As a result, it would have been both highly impractical and also theoretically suspect to evaluate the programme based on the cognitive and behavioural changes of some sample of participants over time in the way that one usually investigates the effectiveness of correctional programming.

Rather, it was decided that the dependent variables of most interest were those on the group level; for example, whether the group dialogues themselves were inclusive, positive or helpful in achieving the goals set out above. As such, we felt that the most appropriate design would be a process evaluation of group dynamics on a week-to-week basis. Data included both quantitative and qualitative measures collected each week in a written survey and through direct, field-based observation. In addition, eleven structured (and tape recorded) interviews were conducted with participants in which they were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their previous backgrounds, social support, anger management etc and also answer open-ended questions regarding their reasons for involvement and experiences with the group. Each interview was tape-recorded to ensure the accurate recall of all the participant's answers to the open-ended interview questions. In addition, less formal interviews with other participants were also conducted on an ad hoc basis as part of the on-going fieldwork.

In all, the "sample" consisted of sixteen weeks of detailed observation and assessment of the Dialogue group. Each prisoner participant volunteered to take part in the study. There were no advantages for participation; nor were there any disadvantages for non-participation. The aims of the study were explained to each potential participant and informed consent was obtained.

The researcher acted as a participant-observer in each dialogue, both contributing to the conversation and making mental notes (as well as discrete written notes) of each week's dialogue. Immediately after each session, the researcher typed up these observations as field notes – usually between five to fifteen pages in length. These have subsequently been analysed separately by the researcher and her supervisor in an inductive fashion in order to identify common themes and processes leading to successful and unsuccessful outcomes.

These outcomes are based on written participant feedback following each session and the researcher's own observations and assessments. At the completion of each weekly session, the researcher gave the participants feedback forms in an envelope and asked them to complete the forms regarding their perceptions of that week's session. This



formal response was entirely optional. Fifty weekly feedback forms were returned to the researcher over the course of sixteen weeks, leading to an overall response rate of 26%.

## OVERALL FINDINGS

### *I. Overall Satisfaction*

On average, participants were very satisfied with how the group was being run and the topics discussed.

**Table 1: Level of overall satisfaction of participants**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall Usefulness/Value Of the Week's Dialogue Session	50	1	10	8.64	2.238

Scores from individual participants ranged from a low of 1 (out of 10) to 10 (out of 10) on the various weeks, but the mean or average score across the 16 weeks was a very respectable 8.64 out of 10.

The open ended comments from prisoner participants in the “final say” aspect of the survey were equally positive. Typical comments included the following:

“I would like to say that I attended Dialogue group frequently and grew to really enjoy my time there. It was something I looked forward to every week. It was uplifting to know that the volunteers were willing to give up their time and money to take an interest in prisoners and our lives in general. I found the group very pleasant and accommodating. This scheme should be more widely available inside prison”.

“I personally was contented with my first meeting. Mainly because we started out with the right topic pertaining to the boy that hung himself. Shared a moment of silence for his cause which was very honourable. Then everyone had something to say toward the situation then move on to condemnation of the prison system and things that could and can be done to make the changes”.

Additionally, prisoner participants seemed to have no difficulty understanding and appreciating the purpose of the Dialogue process.

“It was a release from day to day prison life. Normal prison chat is about prison and ways to better ones environment. Discussions with the public is enlightening and helps to stay in contact with ‘normal’ people. This sense of normality is easily lost in a prison environment. A very enjoyable first session”.

This itself is an accomplishment as many prison based programmes are implemented without the support and acceptance of the prison population.

## *II. How the Dialogue Process Works*

Knowing that the Dialogue process is appreciated by participants is a valuable first step. The second step is to ask why and how the process works. That is, what is it about a Dialogue group that makes it particularly valuable for participants. Each week participants were asked to rate the Dialogue group on the following dimensions, again on a scale of 1 to 10:

Table 2: Why and how the dialogue process works

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Level of co-operation among participants	50	2	10	8.22	2.053
<b>Freedom to express what I wanted to say</b>	50	1	10	8.78	2.102
<b>Respect shown by volunteers to the group</b>	49	1	10	9.43	1.768
<b>Respect shown by facilitators to the group</b>	50	1	10	9.00	1.906
Respect shown by prisoners	49	1	10	7.96	2.198
<b>Content of the dialogue</b>	50	1	10	7.94	2.419
Level of motivation among participants	50	2	10	8.02	1.868
<b>Degree to which you were listened to</b>	50	2	10	8.48	2.252
Quality of the Dialogue across prison/non-prison groups	50	1	10	8.46	2.012

These scores suggested a very consistent level of high satisfaction with dimensions such as “respect shown by volunteers to the group” and “respect shown by facilitators” (averaging 9.43 and 9.00 out of 10, respectively). As one of the purposes

of the group is to promote a respectful dialogue between prisoners and those outside the prison walls, this is a very encouraging finding indeed.

The five **variables in bold** seem to be the most important variables to the prisoner participants. A stepwise multiple regression was conducted to determine what variables predicted how useful the participants found the session to be to them. The variables “freedom to express what I wanted to say”, “respect shown by volunteers to the group”, “content of the dialogue”, “degree to which you were listened to” and “respect shown by facilitators to the group” were found to significantly predict how useful the participants perceived the session to be to them [ $F= 31.348$ ;  $df= 5, 43$ ;  $p<.001$ ]. See table 3 for a list of beta values and p values.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Usefulness/value of Session

Model	Standardized Beta	t	p value
Constant		4.179	.000
Freedom to express what I want to say	.385	4.008	.000
Respect shown by volunteers to the group	-.300	-3.481	.001
Content of the dialogue	.235	2.440	.019
<b>Degree to which you were listened to</b>	<b>.700</b>	<b>6.882</b>	<b>.000</b>
Respect shown by facilitators to the group	-.302	-3.480	.001

Importantly, the variable that seemed to be the strongest contributor to the perceived success of a particular week was the variable (in bold above) “Degree to which you were listened to”. This suggests that sincere listening might be the greatest strength of the Dialogue process.

Among the primary benefits that prisoners said they gained from participation, in the qualitative portion of the survey, included an opportunity to develop empathy skills and a better understanding of their own feelings and behaviours. Among the comments in this regard are the following:

“I feel this group helps and is helping for me to talk about things that you can’t talk about anywhere else in this shit hole, and it also helps to hear other comments, even though I find it hard to see and take in other people’s points of view. But at least I can see this and I will try and change it”.

“The group helps to see different aspects of all walks of life and how everyone’s views are different; it helps to take on different morals to help develop an opinion of your own on different subjects”.

“This has been very helpful to me because it helps me to look at myself and learn more about myself. I don’t think the session could be any better than what it already is”.

“I think the group is helping me to see where I am going wrong in my life, and has helped me to make up my mind to sort out my life and go straight. I don’t think there is much, if any, room for improvement in making the group any better as it is already running very well in my opinion”.

Importantly, the areas of the most concern on the feedback forms were the “respect shown by prisoners” in the dialogue and the “overall content of the dialogues”, both of which were rated slightly lower overall (7.96 and 7.94 respectively) than the other dimensions. Both of these areas also featured strongly in the written feedback to the open-ended questions on the weekly survey as well.

The vast majority of criticisms levelled at the Dialogue process from prisoner participants were directed at fellow prisoners. Most of these comments exonerated or at least did not explicitly mention the non-prisoner participants in the complaints. For instance:

I found it very rude of the bloke that walked out as I was enjoying it up until then. I feel that his actions were well out of line. But that was interesting and I will be attending the next group, look forward to it and your company.

The issue of dialogue content was also the subject of numerous qualitative remarks. In almost all of these, prisoner participants plead for a focus on issues and topics that are not simply prison-related.

“I felt this week was a lot better as there was more sensible subjects discussed. But I still felt it was all prison related and I felt the idea was to get your head out of prison for a couple of hours. But being in prison obviously a lot of people will have issues with problems i.e. treatment by officers, food, etc. etc. but overall I enjoyed myself and will definitely be attending for the rest of my sentence”.

The majority of topics spoken about during the Dialogue groups were about the prison facilities, e.g. education, prison programmes, prison food, inadequate complaints procedure and substandard cells on A wing. Drugs, immigrants, the prison’s treatment of homosexuals, the amount of respect shown to prisoners by prison officers and the employment opportunities available to ex-prisoners when they leave prison were also frequent topics of conversation during the Dialogue groups. Of course, it is important to highlight that the topics of conversation were not as important as how the prisoners interacted with each other and with the other participants in the group, as will become evident further on in this report.

When listing what they enjoyed the most about the Dialogue process, prisoner participants frequently mentioned the benefits of dialogues that range beyond the familiar terrain of crime, drugs and prison.

“The most useful and positive thing in the group for me is that I can freely express myself/feelings without fear of reprisals and secondly I have an opportunity to talk to people whom are able to discuss properly things that are not connected to the prison environment. When inside, 95% of all conversations involve crime/drugs/violence and prison itself, this becomes tedious and depressing and it

gives off such a negative attitude. So therefore the group offers me an opportunity to 'come alive' and just be myself'.

### III. Group Facilitation

Overall, the participants appeared to be happy with the facilitation of the group. On average, the participants disagreed or disagreed somewhat that the facilitators should have done more to steer the dialogue and to allow everyone to have a say within the dialogue.

Table 4: Mean Evaluations of Facilitators from the Weekly Feedback Forms

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Facilitators should have done more to steer the dialogue	50	1	6	2.54	1.740
Facilitators should have done more to allow everyone to have a say	49	1	6	2.20	1.514

Scores of 5 or 6 (out of 6) suggest that participants felt that facilitation should have been handled differently. As such, mean scores of around 2 reflect quite well on the role of facilitation overall.

Still, some comments were made that more should be done to bring all participants more fully into the conversation each week.

Some of the boys who turned up today didn't say a word (I said it for them) ha ha. It would be a lot better if they spoke more, gave more to the group, voiced their own opinions instead of just sitting on the fence, so to speak!

I think that everyone in turn should have a say individually and a topic should be discussed further as it was hard to get your opinion across.

Likewise, there was a general feeling that overly talkative and disruptive participants should be reigned in by the non-prisoner Dialogue participants. In particular, in week nine and ten the prisoners' ratings of the facilitators changed to suggest that the facilitators should have done more to control and steer the group's dialogue. One prisoner stated

"Sometimes if not guided, prisoners tend to steer the discussion to prison events and moans rather than wider issues. While most prisoners present seem to want to engage in actual dialogue a minority appeared to just want to put their own negative point of view (e.g. I am a bad boy, this is what I do, you can't stop me). More might have been done by the facilitators (or other members of the group) to challenge this and open the discussion. The 'talking hat' is a great idea and was respected. Perhaps facilitators should do more to set a topic for discussion. This would need to be accessible to all and chosen in such a way so as not to restrict the open flow of dialogue (e.g. what do u think of reality TV shows?). This could start a dialogue and then go anywhere. I am sure that some prisoners use this

opportunity to get some time out of their cells and some coffee and biscuits. Generally this was not the case and most actually wanted to talk sensibly.”

Although some of the participants in the group during weeks nine and ten were slightly critical of the facilitators’ handling of problem prisoners, they were nonetheless anxious that they should not be perceived as critical of the group. The same prisoner who wrote the above statement continued to write:

“It was good that those who were quiet were from time to time encouraged to put a point of view but not pressured if they did not want to. At least they were exposed to the idea that if they wanted to say something they could and that what they had to say would be listened to. This could give them the confidence to develop an opinion and perhaps to say something in future.”

Another wrote:

“I think the law should have been put to the chosen few who just put in silly remarks when other people are talking. Other than that I enjoyed it very much”.

#### *IV. Volunteers Contribution to the Group*

While the majority of participants felt that the volunteers should not have contributed more to the dialogue, a small number of prisoners expressed an interest in hearing more about what the volunteers had to say regarding the topics being discussed in the group. One prisoner stated

“I personally think that there was one visitor that needs to give more input she is a bit silent through-out most of the meeting. Maybe just one of these days, hope to see her on one of her better days that would make me very happy. I hope she doesn’t find my statement offensive because I in other ways admire her. Just need to open up a bit more. If a point is said after all the view we should pin point an acceptable reason for the better understanding. Thank you.”

Additionally, a small number of comments mentioned the benefits of hearing more about the volunteers’ outside lives and personal interests:

“People who run the group could say more about themselves and bring more people in to the prison. Would be better for volunteers to talk more about themselves”.

Whilst some suggested that the group could be improved by involving staff from the prison or else including more practical/useful information for prisoner participants:

“It would be nice to have a member of staff i.e. PO, SO or even a Governor at one of these meetings to get their point of view”.

“The group was very useful as to where to get other information and views. It would be more useful if the visitors would be able to help with accommodation etc. as they are the only people who seem to care about the prisoner welfare”.

Yet, all the prisoners expressed gratitude to the volunteers for taking the time to come into prison to talk to them and many prisoners shook the hands of the volunteers each week as they left the group.

“It was something I looked forward to every week. It was uplifting to know that the volunteers were willing to give up their time and money to take an interest in prisoners and our lives in general.”

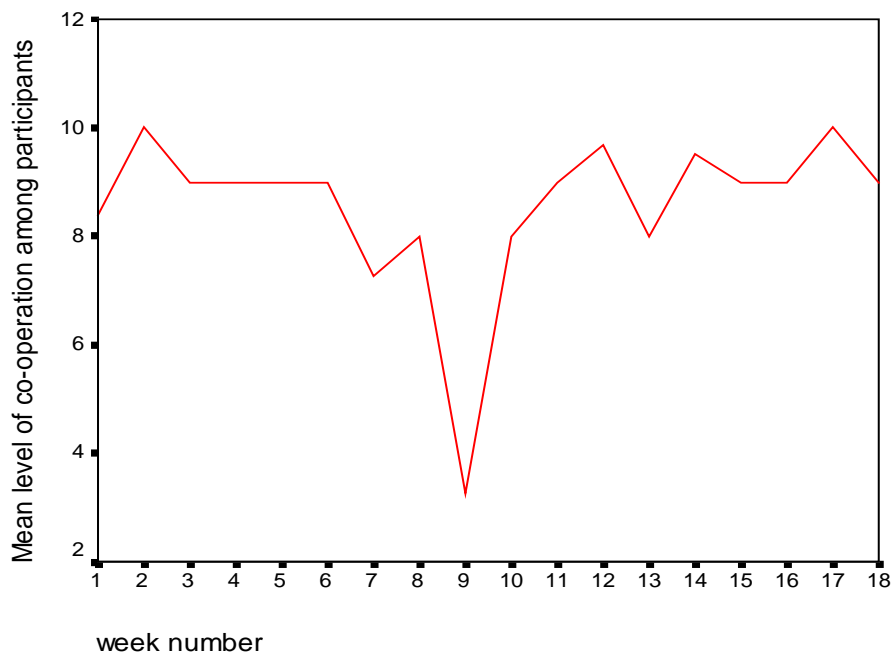
“Good to interact with intelligent members of society. May I also mention my personal thanks to all volunteers for their time and effort they give up to attend Dialogue group.”



## WEEK BY WEEK COMPARISONS

One way ANOVAs were used to make week by week comparisons of the feedback forms to determine if the quality of the dialogue differed week from week and if so why.

A one way ANOVA found a significant difference in the level of co-operation shown among participants [ $F= 3.30$ ;  $df= 17, 32$ ;  $p<.01$ ]. See figure 1 for graphical representation of the level of co-operation among the participants across the different weeks. From this graph, it can be seen that week 9 is rated as significantly less motivated than the other weeks.



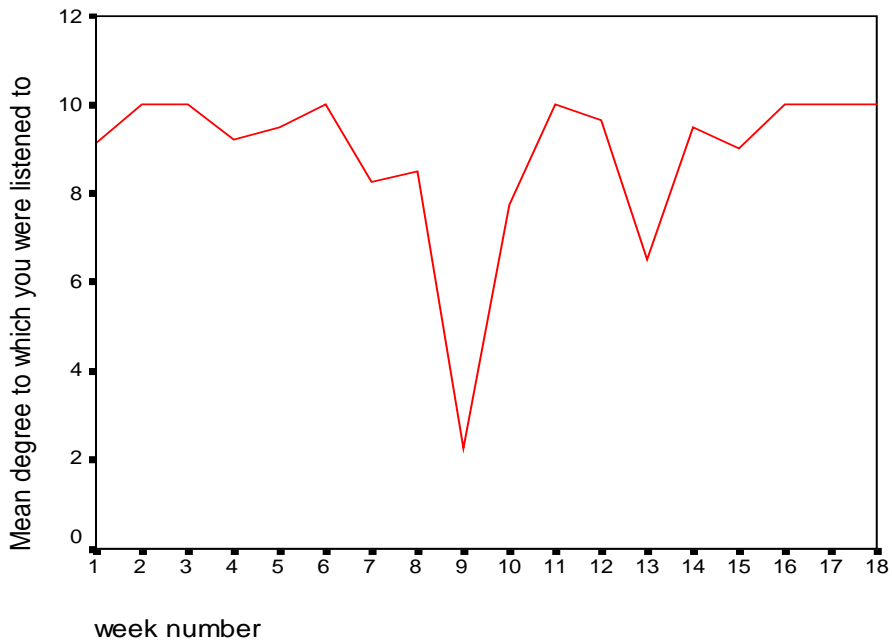
**Figure 1: Mean Level of Co-operation Among Prisoners**

The amount of respect shown by participants to each other in the group differed significantly across the different weeks [ $F= 4.174$ ;  $df= 17, 31$ ;  $p<.001$ ]. From figure 2 the participants in week 9 were rated as significantly less respectful than any of the other weeks.



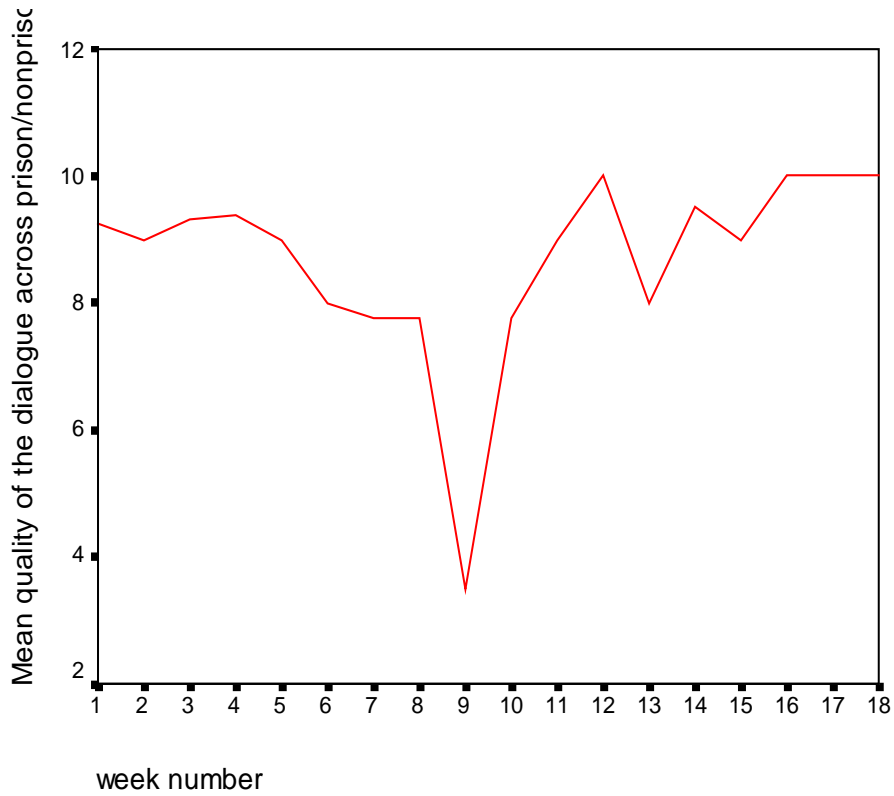
**Figure 2: Mean Level of Respect Demonstrated by Prisoners**

The degree to which participants felt as if they were listened differed significantly across the different weeks [ $F= 8.377$ ;  $df= 17, 32$ ;  $p<.001$ ] with participants rating week 9 as significantly worse than the other weeks (see figure 3).



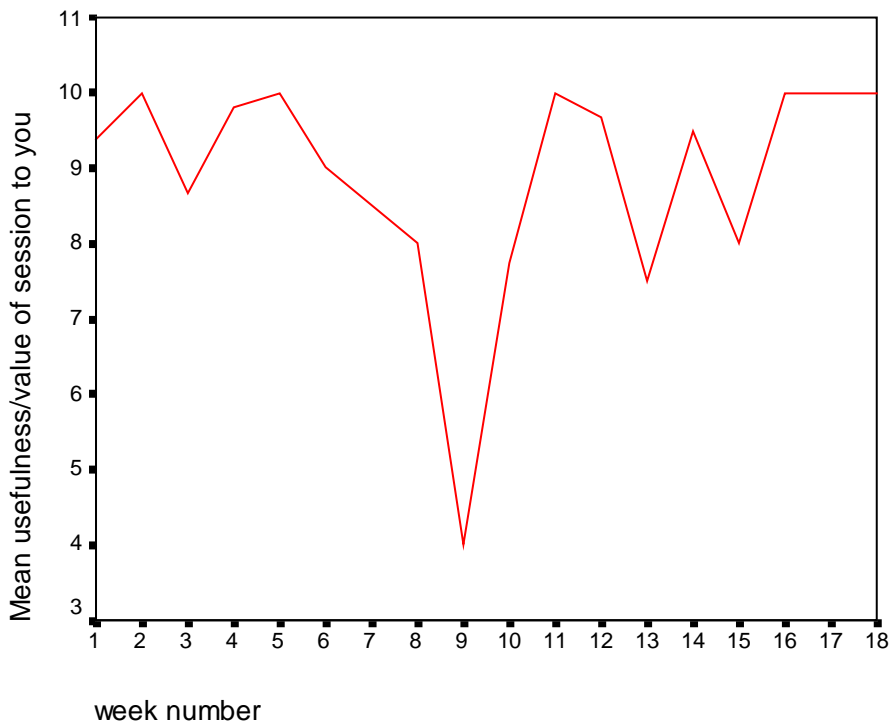
**Figure 3: Mean Rating of How Much You were Listened to**

In addition, the quality of the dialogue across prison and non-prison issues was found to differ significantly by week [ $F= 4.179$ ;  $df= 17, 32$ ;  $p<.001$ ] with the quality of week nine's topics being rated as less than average (see graph 4).



**Figure 4: Mean Quality of Prison/Non-Prison Topics**

Finally, the usefulness/value of the session to the participants differed significantly by week number [ $F= 1.921$ ;  $df= 17, 32$ ;  $p<.10$ ]. Once again week nine was rated as significantly less useful than the other weeks. See graph 5.



**Figure 5: Mean Level of Usefulness/Value of Session**

## WHEN DIALOGUE BREAKS DOWN

From these week by week comparisons it is obvious that week 9 was not as productive as the other weeks but why should this be the case? In what way did week 9 differ from the other weeks? The researcher's field notes were examined to understand the ways in which week 9 differed from the other weeks. In addition, while it is possible that contextual events within HMP Norwich may have influenced week 9's Dialogue group, the researcher is unaware of any specific contextual influences that would have impacted on week 9 over and above the other weeks.

### *I. Moving Beyond Cynicism*

Firstly, only one of the two regular facilitators was present at this meeting as the other facilitator was unable to attend. However, the facilitator who was unable to attend the group was male and none of the other facilitators or volunteers present at week 9, were male. This fact may be important as all the prisoners were male and perhaps they needed a male present in the group with whom they could relate. The fact that there was no male present in week 9 may have added to the difficulty of moving twelve prisoners beyond cynicism to constructive solutions. In the best weeks, the dialogue moved from a litany of complaints to a focus on solutions.

During this week's group, however, much time was spent complaining about the food in prison. The regular facilitator tried to focus them on a positive aspect of the food by saying that it was better than hospital food. To this, one of the participants replied that he had been in Norwich hospital a few weeks ago and he had found the food in Norwich hospital much better than in the food in Norwich prison. He also said that at least in hospital you only had to stay there for a short period of time but when in prison you always have to eat prison food.

Following on from this, one of the participants complained about how bad the education department was in HMP Norwich. He said:

“They only put those courses and stuff on to look good to those on the outside so that they look as if they are trying to rehabilitate us but they just don't care. They are in it to make a profit that's all”.

Other participants agreed with him, stating that the workshop definitely generates a profit as they are only paid £8 a week. One participant suggested that it would be better if they were paid more money as this would help them when they are released but others disagreed with this stating that it would not make much difference as he would just come out as a better dressed con. Another participant said that the prison did not really care about rehabilitation as if they did they would run courses longer than six months. He believed people would not change very much in six months. Other participants stated that private jails were better organised and offered more courses. Yet another participant argued that education was a waste of time but some of the other participants disagreed with him, saying that they were going to make sure their children were well educated.

After the tea-break, the nature of the conversation became more cynical with the participants speaking about why immigrants should not be allowed into the country. Many of them stated that they were glad that a group of immigrant workers had been drowned when picking cockles as they believed too many immigrants came to England for the free handouts. One participant said that

“England would be better off looking after itself and sorting its own mess out rather than giving money away to places like Africa who could never afford to pay it back”.

Other participants said that immigrants should not want to leave their countries as they should be proud of where they live. At this, the substitute facilitator replied that the majority of English people did not actually originally come from England and she used the royal family as an example. The regular facilitator stated that she had fallen in love with England when she was twenty four years old and had worked here all her life. The participants said that she was an exception.

Participants also said that they blamed the government for allowing people into the country. When the substitute facilitator replied that her grandparents had had to flee Russia as their lives were at risk, the participants said that they could understand cases like that but they argued that other countries did not take in as many immigrants as England. When other members of the group suggested that England did not take in as many immigrants as suggested by the newspapers, the participants disagreed with them.

As the regular facilitator asked people to give a final thought for the meeting, one participant stated that he really hated the prison staff. He said:

“How dare they speak to me like that? They have no respect for you so it’s not surprising that we talk to them the way we do. They think they are better than us just because they have keys but they forget that they are paid to be our lackeys to lock us up and unlock us and to get us what we want. But they forget that. If they talk to me like that then of course I’m going to square up to them. They’re not going to get away treating me like that. I don’t care what they do to me I’m already in prison and I’d prefer to do more time for hitting them than to ignore them and have them disrespect me”.

The other participants in the group encouraged him to ignore the prison staff and not to hit them but they did this because they argued that the prison staff would only gang up on him and beat him up. This is part of the value of the Dialogue process as it slowly moves from these sort of criticisms to solutions by providing alternative perspectives on other people’s problems.

Lastly, one participant said that he thought some of the newer participants were only coming for the tea and coffee and that he felt disheartened by this.

In this group, the tone of the conversation was pessimistic, cynical and full of feelings of powerlessness with many participants only focusing on the negative aspects and ignoring the positive side of situations. The lack of a male, with whom the prisoners could relate to, may have made it very hard for the facilitators and volunteers to get

the participants to think in more constructive terms of how they could change things. In addition, it may have added to the difficulty of ensuring that participants respect the boundaries of the group.

## *II. Respect for the Boundaries of the Group*

In week 9 the group started late because not all of the prisoners who participate in the group had been unlocked from their rooms on time. While the substitute facilitator and a prisoner went to investigate why the prisoners had not been released, the other people in the group discussed the prison's failure to unlock people on time for the group, their inability to announce the group on time, and the frustration experienced by the facilitators and volunteers when attempting to enter the prison for the group at the gate. This discussion may have given the impression to some of the participants that the prison did not take the Dialogue group seriously or respect the guidelines by which Dialogue group were operating. However, if the prison did not take them seriously, why should the participants? From the beginning of the group four of the participants were not respectful of the boundaries by which the group operated.

When the regular facilitator began the group, she asked everyone to go around in a circle and introduce themselves, but four participants gave false names. The regular facilitator then asked them for their true names, which they eventually agreed to do. In addition, these four participants continued to speak to each other when other people were speaking. This goes against one of the boundaries of the group, which is "one voice" -- in other words, only one person should speak at a time. Both facilitators did ask them to listen to the person who was speaking, but they would only stop for a minute or so and then they would continue talking amongst themselves again. During the "final say" section at the end of the group, three of the participants, the substitute facilitator and one volunteers said that they had found it very hard to hear what other people were saying as more than one person had been speaking at a time.

Also, there had been a lot of cursing during the course of the conversation. The regular facilitator asked the group if it would be possible for people to try not to curse. She said that the saddest thing that she had heard was how a prisoner had to relearn how to curse, in order to communicate with other people in jail. Two or three participants said that cursing was part of who they were and they were not going to be told to stop and pretend to be something else. The substitute facilitator also asked them to stop cursing as she found the word "cunt" particularly offensive. Another participant stated that they were so accustomed to cursing in prisons as a form of expression that they did not even realise that they were using it. About four of the other participants said that they would try and stop cursing in front of the Dialogue people to show their respect. Some of the other participants continued to curse in front of the facilitator. However, many of the participants did attempt to stop cursing.

Lastly, a volunteer asked the group to take only one or two biscuits each and to make sure that everyone got a biscuit. She said that she thought it was unfair when some people took five or six biscuits and more coffee than they needed, as this meant that other people did not get their biscuits and coffee.

From the above passages, it is evident that this group was testing how well the boundaries of the group were being enforced. Whilst it is very difficult, a balance must be achieved between individual freedom and the smooth operation of the group.

### *III. Final Say*

An examination of what the participants wrote themselves about week 9's Dialogue group may also increase our understanding of why this group was rated as the worst group by the participants in the week by week comparisons. Four participants filled in the final say section of the weekly feedback forms for week 9. They wrote:

"I felt that there was a lot of foul language and nonsense spoken obviously most of the group didn't have the mental capacity to do anything other than swear. Too many immature people in the group. It got rather repetitive towards the end. I felt that we should put ideas in a hat to be discussed that would be better than hearing a lot of shit. But I did enjoy it apart from that and will still attend again."

"I feel that we are stuck on one topic too much."

"The group seems to be falling apart".

"I think on the positive side we got to know who was worth listening to and who just came to take the piss, but I feel the group also got people able to let off a bit of steam after being banged up all day".

On inspection of these comments, it would appear that the nature and tone of the topics discussed during week 9 were influential in the participant's ratings of week 9. Also, these comments suggest that some of the participants were concerned that the operation of the group was suffering due a small number of participants testing the boundaries of the group. Therefore, a balance must be achieved whereby participants do feel free to express themselves but within the boundaries of the group so as not to affect the overall usefulness or value of the group for other participants.

## WHEN DIALOGUE WORKS

It is crucial to note that Week 9 was an aberration as revealed by the week-by-week comparisons. No other week received anything like the negative ratings of that particular week. However, it is important to note that these less productive weeks are part of the process of Dialogue and are equally as important as the productive weeks. These less productive weeks are cathartic and indicative of progress. As such, it is important to end this report on a more appropriately positive note, focusing on “what can go right” at Dialogue meetings. For this purpose, Week 12 was chosen as a typical example of when Dialogue “works”.

### *I. Optimism and Agency*

In week 12, both regular facilitators were present which meant that there was a male present in the group. The group also began late in week 12 because the prison staff had not unlocked nor announced the group on time. Yet, in contrast to week 9, participants did not complain about the prison and prison staff but rather focused on who was leading the group this week. In other words, the prisoners did not focus on the negative but rather moved beyond the cynicism to focus on what they could control and change. The facilitators had asked for two volunteers from week 11 to introduce the group in week 12. Two participants had agreed to do this but unfortunately the two participants who had volunteered to introduce the group were not amongst the group. Some of the participants joked that perhaps it was because the two participants were meant to be introducing the group that they were not there. The facilitators laughed and asked if anyone else would like to introduce the group. One participant agreed and asked everyone to introduce themselves as there were new people present. He also asked if anyone had anything in particular they wanted to talk about.

Allowing a participant to introduce the group was a very good idea because in contrast to week 9, the participants were not powerless to change things but rather a participant could be seen as being in charge of the group and leading the group’s dialogue, thus focusing the prisoner’s attention on what they could do rather than on what they could not do.

One participant said that he wanted to talk about a piss test that he had taken during the week. He said that he had been ill all week and as a result of this he had been dehydrated and unable to take a piss test when they asked him to on Monday. He had then been moved from his room and placed on another landing. He said that the prison staff were aware that he had been genuinely ill over the weekend and knew he would be unable to take the test. Yet, when he spoke to the Senior Officer to explain his situation, the SO had insisted that he still move out of his room even though he would be moving back to the same landing in two days’ time. The participant stated that he felt quiet frustrated by this as he had never failed a test before and the prison staff knew he was not lying. In addition, he was aware that another prisoner whom he worked with had failed the test but yet he was not being moved. He said:

“The screws don’t even think about what they are doing. They don’t seem to



realise how their actions could lead to someone gettin' their head kicked in. I know to them this is no big deal. It's just a piece of paper telling them to move me down and then move me back again. They don't realise how big this is to me. I really want to kick that other guy's head in right now. He's out there giving it all that and getting away with it. I mean what's he doing that I ain't. The screws have got to start thinking about how their actions can wind people up".

Both facilitators and the other members of the group questioned the participant about his relationship with the staff members and the other prisoner. They told him that he had to consider it from the staff's point of view as for all they knew he may not have passed the test. Just because he had passed it before, it did not mean he would pass it again. However, many of the participants agreed with him that the prison staff's treatment of the other prisoner was unusual and appeared unfair. They said that while he could not do anything about what had happened, he must be careful to control his behaviour as if he misbehaved towards the other prisoner this might not ruin his chances of moving to a different wing.

The conversation then moved to how politicians spend money on making housing estates look prettier in an attempt to prevent crime. One participant stated that this was a waste of time. At this, the facilitator asked him what he would do to prevent crime. The participant responded that he would spend money on education as he said that education can keep broaden your mind to understand things from another person's perspective. He said that he knew at 8 years old that he would end up in prison as all he did was hang out in the streets with his friends.

"If you get a beating at school and you go home and get a beating at home then you aren't going to go to either of them are you. You go out and hang out with your friends on the street".

One of the facilitators suggested that it was never too late to go back and get an education. She used herself as an example stating that she was older than most people in the group but yet she was back at college trying to get a degree. Many people laughed and joked with the facilitator when she said that she was older than most people there.

In addition, one participant spoke about how he was sick of being arrested and had decided to confess to all his crimes, so that upon release he would have a chance of rebuilding his life. He spoke about his previous crimes and said that he had been young and stupid. He told the group that all he cared about back then was trying to stay ahead of the police in car chases. He never considered the fact that he might kill someone. He said he realised how lucky he had been and now he had a girlfriend and a true friend outside waiting for him. He said that he was not going to let them down. The other participants congratulated him and wished him all the best but they warned him that he would need to find an outlet to channel his energies if he was to have any hope of going straight. He agreed with them and told them that he was going to work on the bodywork of cars in an attempt to channel his energies.

In contrast to week 9, the nature of the conversation and tone of the conversation in week twelve was much more optimistic and agentic. Everyone is acknowledging the

existence of problems but they were focusing on things that they could change to improve their situation rather than focusing on negative aspects of the situation and their inability to change their situation as was the case in week 9. In addition, the facilitators encouraged the participants to think of what they would do if they were in a position to change things. Rather than focusing on the problem, they encouraged the participants to think of a solution to the problem.

## *II. Respect for the Boundaries of the Group*

In week 12, the participants of the group respected the boundaries of the group. Only one person spoke at a time and everyone listened to, and was able to hear, what other members of the group were saying. There was no mention of people taking more coffee or biscuits than they were entitled to nor was there any reference to people cursing at one another in the field notes. The prisoners listened and respected what each person had to say and they also offered alternative interpretations of the topics being discussed. The facilitators did not feel the need to reassert the boundary of one voice during this group as no-one spoke when another person was speaking.

Examining the participants' comments in the final say section of the weekly feedback forms may also help us to understand why the Dialogue group worked in this week.

## *II. The Participant's "Final Say"*

Three participants completed the final say section of the weekly feedback form for that week. They said

"I feel the discussion was very interesting. See how other inmates handle their situation and what their problems in prison are".

"I couldn't really say how the group could be more positive as it was a good group today and very interesting".

"Being able to voice subjects that need to be addressed and try to help each other with our views if people didn't show some respect. Just went for the right reasons".

From these comments, week 12 would seem to have received a more favourable evaluation as a result of the more optimistic nature and tone of the conversation. The tone of the conversation was hopeful rather than cynical and the participants were encouraged to think about how they could improve their situations and alternative methods of handling their problems. Furthermore, only one person spoke at a time, which allowed all members of the group to listen to each other and respond to each other. This group had achieved a balance between individual freedom and respect for the other members of the group.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Overall, it is difficult to interpret our findings from this 16-week process evaluation as anything other than positive. One participant probably best captured the apparent early success of the group in the following, partially ironic quote:

“Altogether a very good and productive group. Unfortunately (??) I am being released but if I was not I would certainly attend on every occasion. My best wishes to all facilitators and participants of the group. I think it is doing good work and hope it continues from strength to strength.”

Other prisoners stated:

“You look forward to it rather than laying on your bed with nothing to look forward to from one day to another. But you can look forward to Monday for the Dialogue group.....for people who don't get anything, no letters, no visits or money or anything but they can look forward to Dialogue group”

“It's good. I like it. It lets you say what you think with no fighting. If we had the kind of conversation that we have in the Dialogue group on the wing, it would be a fight....It's different in Dialogue. It's respect in the Dialogue group”

That said, there is always room for improvement as the findings of this report demonstrate clearly.

It seems clear that the next step for The Dialogue Trust is to evaluate the programme on an individual-level basis. However, this would require two changes:

- Expansion of the Dialogue model to other establishments or multiplication of the programme within HM Prison Norwich.
- Greater commitment and consistency in attendance among Dialogue prisoner participants.

This latter point is perhaps the more controversial one. At present, prisoners participate in Dialogue on a week-to-week voluntary basis, often coming and going with no real consistency. Every week there are new faces, and familiar faces often drop out of the dialogue after being transferred, released or becoming involved with different opportunities within the prison. Although this dynamic and interesting mix can help to facilitate interesting dialogue each week, it is not ideal for measuring the success of the programme across individual participants. It was not practical in our own, small scale evaluation, for instance, to conduct pre- and post-participation interviews with participants, because it was never clear how long participation would last and when a participant's last week would be.

In order to demonstrate significant effects on individual-level psychological dimensions (such as empathy or self-understanding) let alone more concrete behavioural measures (recidivism, in-prison behaviours), it is important to secure a stronger commitment from participants. For instance, participation might be limited to those who can commit to at least 12 weeks' attendance in the groups. If this is

impossible, it is difficult to imagine how the intervention could be evaluated on the individual-level.

Beyond its value for evaluation, this sort of commitment might improve the quality of group dialogue as well. For instance, in their feedback commentary, several of the prisoner participants suggested that one of the problems of some weeks' dialogue was the participation (or non-participation) of prisoners not committed to the goals of the group. One wrote:

“I feel that the group is starting to fall apart because some people who are now coming to the group are only coming to get out of their cells and for free coffee and biscuits”.

If participants were allowed to “sample” the group for a week, then made to decide if they wanted to commit or not to the Dialogue experience for a set number of weeks, this might improve the level of conversation week-to-week.

### *Research Next Steps*

If everyone approves, the participant-observation fieldwork for this study will continue on a largely ad hoc basis over the course of the next year or more. At this point, however, we are recommending the discontinuation of the weekly feedback surveys. The findings from the first 16 weeks have been robust and suggestive of several important directions for implementation and process-level changes. The next step would be to shift the focus from process to outcome and determine whether participation in this group can reduce the pains of imprisonment and the consequent problems of coping inside and upon release.

**APPENDIX A**

*Dialogue Group Evaluation*

Confidential Weekly Feedback Form

*Please rate this week's Dialogue session on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 as the best) on the following criteria: (circle the relevant number)*

- 1. Level of co-operation among participants 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 2. Amount of freedom to express what I wanted to say 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 3. Amount of respect shown by visiting volunteers to the group 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 4. Amount of respect shown by facilitators to group members 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 5. Amount of respect shown by prisoner participants 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 6. Content/substance of the discussion topics this week 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 7. Level of motivation among group participants 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 8. Overall usefulness or value of the session to you 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 9. Degree to which you were listened to by others 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- 10. Quality of the dialogue across different groups (prison/non-prison) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Agree or Disagree? (please circle the response that applies to you)**

Facilitators should have done more to steer the discussion this week?

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree    Strongly Agree

Facilitators should have done more to allow everyone to have a say in today's discussion

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree    Strongly Agree

Volunteers should have contributed more to the discussion today

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Disagree Somewhat    Agree Somewhat    Agree    Strongly Agree

FINAL WORD: What was the most helpful or positive aspect of this session and how could have this session been more positive for you?

*(please use the back of this page for your answer)*

**Please feel free to write as much as you wish in response to this question**

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**Please place this form in the envelope provided  
Seal the envelope and hand it to the Dialogue Group Facilitator  
who will pass it to the research team**