

Prisoner participation in open and training prisons

A toolkit for prison staff



**changing lives
reducing crime**

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Introduction

Involving prisoners in some of the decisions that affect them has benefits to prisoners and prison staff alike.¹ This toolkit is a guide to setting up and managing a prisoner participation scheme in your prison.

It is based on HMP Ford's prisoner participation scheme, which has been praised for being successful in influencing requests and complaints made by prisoners (Independent Monitoring Board, 2011-2012).

Over the next few pages we highlight some of the good practice emerging from that scheme and explain how it can be applied not just to open and training prisons but other custodial settings too.

¹ Clinks (2011) defined service user involvement as "the processes by which the people using a service become involved in the planning, development and delivery of that service to help make changes and improvements".

Why is prisoner participation a good thing?

The short answer is that there are benefits for staff, prisoners and the prison as a whole. Knowing what these are should make it easier for you to respond positively to prisoners wanting to influence decisions. And this will be vital to the long-term success of any scheme you choose to adopt. According to staff and prisoners at HMP Ford, there are a number of benefits to a prisoner participation scheme.

- **Improved relationships between prison staff and prisoners** by creating common goals and purposes
- **Improved job satisfaction for staff** by helping you to engage more meaningfully with prisoners
- **Gives staff and prisoners a greater sense of empowerment** so they feel they have an impact on how the prison is run
- **Reduces tension and pressure on prison staff** by redirecting queries or requests to your prisoner participation scheme
- **Reduces the number of complaints** because prisoners' concerns are dealt with more efficiently
- **Helps your prison offer better services** because services are based on the diverse needs of prisoners

Prisoner participation benefits at HMP Ford



Set your aims

For any scheme to be successful, it's important to work out what you hope to get out of prisoner participation at your prison. So, firstly, set out your aims.

Example aims

As a prison, we want to:

- reduce the number of complaints
- make services more accessible
- improve efficiency and remove duplication
- create opportunities for prisoners to develop skills and confidence
- improve the experience for prisoners and visitors
- boost staff morale
- enhance the prison's public image

How to set your aims

Here are a few tips for creating your list of aims.

- 1 Try to think about your prison's overall strategy and where, specifically, prisoner participation could support it.
- 2 Get ideas and input from as many of your staff as you can. You can do this through team meetings, or a survey, for example.
- 3 Engage the governor. You will need high level support for the scheme.
- 4 You may wish to ask prisoners what they think the scheme should achieve. Open dialogue is more likely to result in wider engagement amongst the prison community.

And finally ...

- 5 Once you have set the aims, identify who needs to be involved in developing them. For example, if one of your aims is to create opportunities for prisoners, you should consult with the Parole Board. Refining that aim with the Parole Board may make it more relevant to parole hearings. It may also reassure the board of the value of prisoner engagement. For example, they might request that you keep a record of prisoner attendance at meetings on the Prison National Offender Management Information System (p-NOMIS).

Step 3

Decide how involved prisoners will be

There are some decisions you make in your prison where prisoner involvement isn't appropriate. With others, prisoners may be able to take a very active role. The key is to decide early on the range of prisoner involvement across different decisions in your prison and communicate that to prisoners.

One way of doing this is to use Arnstein's 1969 ladder of engagement and participation, which we have adapted here for prisons.

The ladder of engagement and participation

1. Devolving: Prisoners are the decision-makers of (some) decisions	Devolving
2. Collaborating: Prisoners participate in co-design of service and decision-making. They are involved in identifying problems, discussing options, developing alternatives and identifying the preferred way forward.	Collaborating
3. Involving: Prisoners are directly consulted about decisions being taken by management and are involved to some degree in decision-making. Their concerns and aspirations are consistently fed into the decision making process, through reference groups for example.	Involving
4. Consulting: Prisoners' views on decisions are listened to, and there's a commitment to act on these if possible. If not possible, explanations are given. For example, views sought through surveys, panels, suggestion boxes or focus groups.	Consulting
5. Informing: Prisoners are provided with balanced and objective information to help them understand problems, alternatives, opportunities and solutions.	Informing

Decide how involved prisoners will be

A flexible approach is required

It is likely that different prisoners will want to engage at different levels, perhaps because of ROTL activities, varying interest or competing priorities. You can use the ladder to illustrate to prisoners the amount of time or effort they could commit – if they wished to. You can also use it to demonstrate that involvement at any level is valuable. This is likely to increase participation.

Linking participation and decision making

Whatever levels you decide upon for prisoner participation, it's likely that you will need strong links to prison management. You may decide there needs to be a formal relationship in place with a committee (or similar group).

It is also important that your prison actively considers how prisoners may move up the ladder to participate more fully.

To see how they do it at HMP Ford, take a look at the case study on the [next page](#).

Key factors in helping prisoners decide their involvement

Make sure prisoners know:

- they will be supported and have the knowledge, skills and confidence to communicate their views and experiences
- they will be heard, understood and respected
- how much influence they will have over any one decision
- they can engage at different levels

Case study: Prisoner participation at HMP Ford

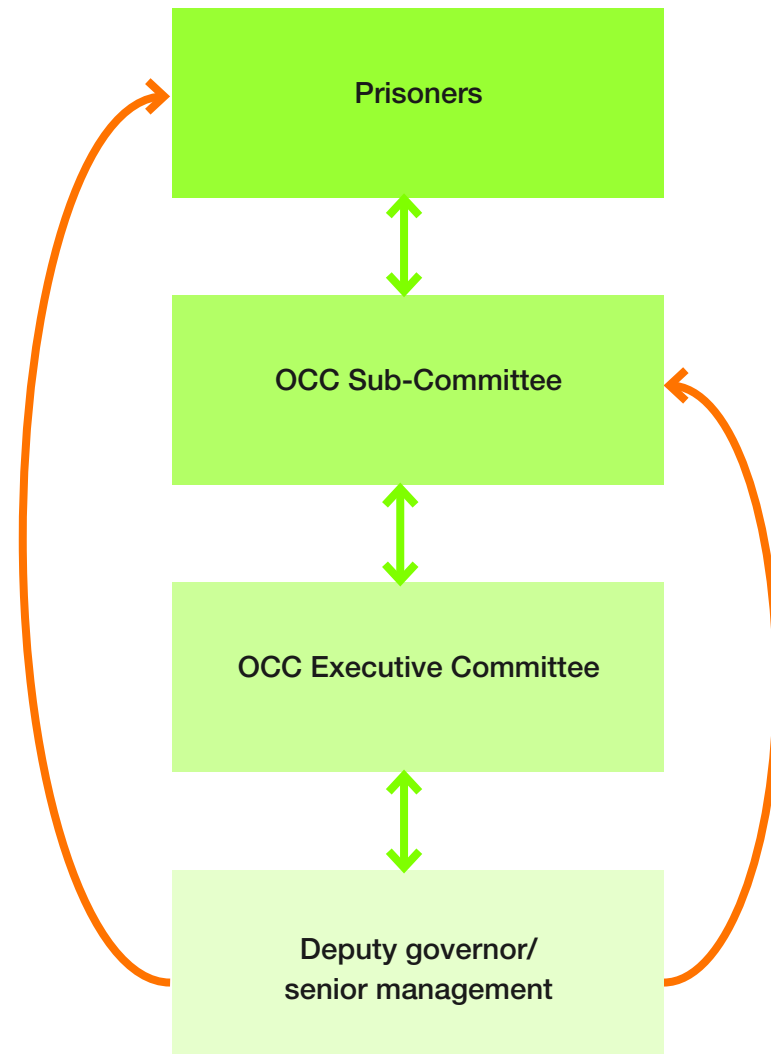
In 2012, HMP Ford formed an Offender Consultative Committee (OCC) to implement prisoner participation. The committee consists of two groups: an Executive Committee, which includes three prisoners and a handful of additional members, and a Sub-Committee, which is made up of 20 prisoners.

How does it work?

Prisoners raise concerns. These are discussed by the OCC Executive Committee, which can – if necessary – escalate to senior management. The outcome of these discussions is passed down to the OCC Sub-Committee, which updates the general prison population on progress.

The HMP Ford OCC has representatives from each work department. This helps to direct complaints from each area and quickly feed responses back into their respective departments.

HMP Ford prisoner participation model



Step 3

Duties and responsibilities at HMP Ford

Level	1. OCC Executive Committee	2. OCC Sub-Committee
Consists of	<p>3 prisoners elected directly by their peers to the OCC. These 'leads' act as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chairperson • deputy chair • secretary <p>A number of additional peer researchers</p>	<p>20 members, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a prison officer from each prison department • orderlies (prisoners who have demonstrated a certain level of responsibility and trust in the past) • 3 non-orderlies • identified through OCC notices on door
Meets	Once a month	Once a week
Time commitment	<p>3 days a week per person for leads</p> <p>1 day a week for additional members</p>	Varies
Discusses	<p>Complaints and requests from prisoners, relayed via the OCC Sub-Committee and prison officers</p> <p>Peer researchers provide proactive outreach to gather prisoner opinions</p>	<p>A range of prisoner concerns such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facility access (washing/fridges) • speeding up and reviewing Release on Temporary License (ROTL) applications • curfews from returning home leavers • accommodation concerns, particularly around shared cell occupancy • Also consults with relevant diversity groups
Additional duties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce minutes • Hold additional meetings with the deputy governor on urgent issues • Other administrative tasks 	None specifically – prisoners can voice concerns without becoming involved in implementing changes
Outcomes	Communicated to OCC Sub-Committee	Communicated to general prison population
Can escalate to	Senior management of prison	OCC Executive Committee

Plan to succeed

Now that you've decided a) what your aims are, b) what level of participation is appropriate and c) how that will tie into prison management's decision making, you can start planning.

Try to get feedback from prisoners about your planning at the earliest stage possible. The plan is likely to change once prisoner participation is up and running, but their additional input should help you make improvements.

If you don't have an equivalent staff engagement group, you may wish to set one up to complement the prisoner participation scheme.

Top tip

Plan sufficient staff time to cope with an initial increase in enquiries and complaints. It is a good sign that communication is increasing, but you will need to be prepared to react swiftly, thoroughly and transparently (where you can). If prisoners can see progress, they are much more likely to acknowledge the value of prisoner participation.

Your planning checklist

- 1 Who will be responsible for implementation – and do they have the necessary time and knowledge?
- 2 What resources are needed – and what are available?
- 3 What activities are involved – and are those possible with the resources available? For ideas on this, take a look at the activities page. [See examples of activities on page 12](#)
- 4 Are there clear boundaries on how much influence the prisoners will have over decisions?
- 5 How will confidentiality be handled? Some confidential complaints should not be discussed by prisoners. Set guidelines detailing what complaints can be heard.
- 6 What is expected from prisoners and staff in terms of communication and respect (in other words, do we need a basic code of conduct)?
- 7 How will complaints be handled under this code of conduct?
- 8 How will you involve all types of prisoners? [See page 11](#)

Plan to succeed

Plan to involve everyone

1 For prisoners with other commitments (like work or community service)

Clinks (2011) suggest whether an incentive scheme for participation is appropriate. HMP Ford OCC members are not paid. Members strongly believe that this retains the credibility of the group and attracts prisoners who are motivated for the right reasons.

Consider working with the Parole Board to make sure they recognise the positive impact of prisoner participation on personal and skills development.

[See examples of aims on page 5](#)

2 For the 40% of prisoners who have low literacy skills

Plan to advertise the scheme, recruit members and promote its benefits in ways that go beyond the written word. Try using prisoner champions or prison radio to spread the word.

3 For prisoners with learning disabilities

Be creative about how you communicate and make sure there are plenty of ways that people can contribute.

4 For prisoners from under-represented groups

Prisoners from minority groups will have a specific perspective. Try to encourage participation from older prisoners, gay or bisexual prisoners and prisoners across all ethnic and religious groups. Using champions and peer-to-peer recruitment can be effective.

5 For the 90% of prisoners with communication difficulties

Think about ways of simplifying what you say. Avoid big words, use simple sentences, provide information in bite-sized chunks and speak slowly.

Top tip

You will need to monitor whether your scheme is representative. You could use p-NOMIS data to check whether your prisoner participants are representative of the recorded age, ethnicity, disability and religion profiles for your prison.

Top tip

At HMP Ford, the Shannon Trust helps prisoners who have reading and writing difficulties to write applications specifically so that they can become members of the OCC and understand information coming out of the OCC.

Ways to engage with prisoners

To encourage as many people as possible to join your participation scheme, it may help to engage them through a range of activities, rather than a single feedback form or prison survey.

Wider choice means you can appeal to varying levels of skill and interest within the population. If you also vary the times at which you do this, you can avoid clashes with other activities that prisoners may perceive to be more important – like ROTL.

Clearly, it all depends on the resources available and your aims. But here are a few suggestions of the types of activities you might like to run.

Top tip

Have your initial activities planned and ready before you launch your participation scheme so you can build swiftly on the momentum.

Examples of activities

- Meetings and focus groups
- Consultations or reference panels
- Surveys and peer research
- Anonymous complaints/suggestions boxes
- Evaluations with groups and individual prisoners
- Observational work (i.e. prisoners observing how the canteen works and making suggestions for improvement) [See page 20](#)
- A newsletter or a feature in an existing prison newsletter
- Training
- Input into recruitment and selection of staff
- An election campaign for prisoner representatives
- Governance meetings
- Service design and service delivery workshops
- Media and publicity

Launch your scheme

Once you're ready to launch your scheme, there are a number of things you can do to ensure it gains traction within your prison.

1 Increase staff awareness

By now staff should be clear about the benefits of prisoner participation. The next step is to make sure they have the information they need to answer any questions prisoners may have. To help with this you can:

- use team meetings, the intranet and staff room posters to spread the word
- provide a 1 page briefing or a set of FAQs

2 Identify champions and assign them roles

To help foster adoption of the new scheme, try to identify champions amongst prisoners and staff. To do this:

- ask managers in each wing to find volunteers or nominate an appropriate lead
- find enthusiastic prisoners to spread the word to their peers
- provide information to them that highlights the hoped-for benefits and outcomes achieved at other prisons [see page 20](#)

3 Promote, promote, promote

When you're ready to promote the scheme to other staff and the general prison population, there are two points to stress above all else: the benefits of the scheme (i.e. how it can help staff or prisoners) and a strong call to action. This is the action ("talk to a person" or "visit the main office") that you want people to take when they're ready to get involved or find out more.

You may also want to explain what prisoner participation is, what activities it might involve and what roles are available.

4 Review

Remember to get feedback and share any lessons learnt.

Launch your scheme

As mentioned before, remember to tailor your promotion so that it appeals to all people, regardless of their reading ability, age, level of skill or interest. [See page 11](#)

Types of promotion you might consider

- Posters (see annexes) – in prominent areas
- Leaflets distributed under doors
- Prison radio
- Existing committees
- Prison newsletter
- A launch event
- Use the Independent Monitoring Board to spread the word

Top tip

In promotional information, try using quotes from prisoners in other prisons. For example HMP Ford prisoners said:

“[It’s about] being part of something, bringing about positive change and helping other prisoners”

“What happens in the prison is as important as what is happening outside [on ROTL] if we are to have a better chance of making positive changes”

You should also incorporate the governor’s commitment to the scheme.

Recruit prisoner participants

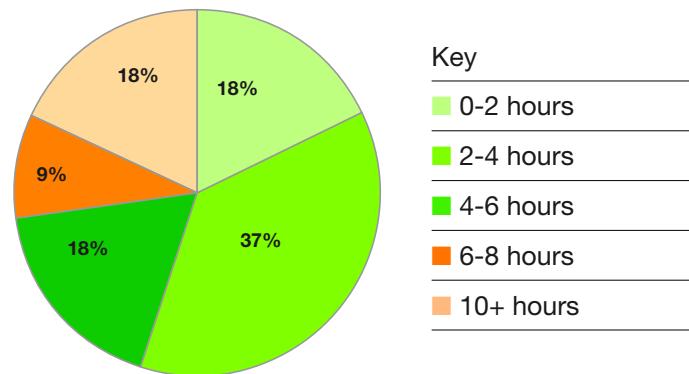
For prisoner participation to be credible, the recruitment of prisoners needs to be fair. It needs to be seen to be fair too.

Creating the following will help you do this.

1 A short and easy to understand role description

This should explain what is required from each prisoner.

Try to be clear about the time commitment.



Length of time dedicated to the OCC per week

Top tip

The less involved staff are seen to be in the selection process, the more credibility the scheme will have. Once it is up and running, prisoner participants should have real influence over the selection of other prisoners. Ideally, prisoners themselves will make the selections. As you set up your scheme you may need to think about adding some independence to the selection panel, through a voluntary sector organisation or an independent monitoring board for example.

2 A recruitment advert and non-written equivalents (see annexes)

Some prisoners may not be able to read, so consider other means of advertising the scheme such as word of mouth or an announcement on prison radio.

3 An application process

This should be informal. It should also be verbal or written, so as not to discriminate against prisoners with reading, writing or learning difficulties (see annexes). In the first instance, all you really want to do is understand who wants to be involved in the scheme, so a simple expression of interest from prisoners should do.

4 A selection process

The process must be fair and not discriminate. Always let a prisoner know why they haven't been selected. [See table page 16](#)

Recruit prisoner participants

4. The selection process

Application process	Structure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual interviews	Panel of 2-3 prisoners and a senior staff member	Makes sure interviewees are reviewed by their own peers	Panel could be biased – issues between prisoners may affect the decision-making process
Group interviews	5-10 interviewees to carry out group exercises	Provides a more relaxed interview environment – allowing peers to share interests and make collective decisions	Success will depend on the response rate to the job role and may require more resources/staff to monitor

Top tip

The OCC was oversubscribed when they first recruited at HMP Ford. It maintains a waiting list of prisoners who want to join the scheme. To keep prisoners interested in future membership it may be a good idea to give them other roles until a place becomes available.

Train prisoner participants

One of the main aims of prisoner participation is to help prisoners develop skills. This isn't just a benefit to the prisoner. A prisoner who understands his or her role is likely to be a more committed and more engaged member of the prison community.

To support prisoners in their roles, consider developing a training programme. This could include topics like:

- how to initiate and become involved in discussions
- how to develop constructive feedback
- how to assess prison services
- committee skills
- peer research skills
- team building skills

The role of your training provider

To assist, your training or education provider should:

- support the prisoner participation scheme by running courses
- make sure that the training for prisoner participation supports wider training aims and is linked into the Parole Board
- advise on the training needs analysis

Top tip

Remember your prisoner participants will change over time. To make it easier to introduce new prisoners to the scheme, produce training that can be repeated.

Step 9

Keep interest in the scheme

Keeping interest in prisoner participation can be a challenge. As key prisoners move on, momentum can falter and enthusiasm may wane. You need to plan how your scheme not only survives, but thrives.

Challenge	Potential impact	Potential actions
Prisoners move on	High turnover of participants	Succession planning – see below
Decisions aren't brought to prisoners in time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The real impact of decisions is lost on prisoners Cynicism sets in amongst prisoners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate benefits to staff Make prisoner participation an early part of the decision-making process If timeframes genuinely prevent prisoner participation, be transparent about it
Prisoners and staff see no benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Momentum lost Prisoners and staff don't get involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feed back outcomes of prisoner participation to staff and prisoners – frequently and in a highly visible way (see top tip on page 19) Find some 'quick wins' – concerns that can be easily remedied
Prisoners are frustrated at limited impact on decisions/ services	Prisoners are disengaged and/or hard to recruit	Be clear about how much influence the prisoner participation can have over any decision
Prisoners feel prisoner participation is ineffective	Prisoners are disengaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure reasonable suggestions are taken up Senior management should manage expectations on when this will be done Challenge staff to explain why suggestions are turned down and feed this back to prisoners
Prisoners do not get full development benefit	Loss of opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan training to be delivered frequently Develop personal development plans for prisoners based on their role descriptions For the most influential roles, consider using an appraisal system
Staff are too busy to engage	One sided engagement with limited impact	Make working on prisoner participation part of the job description for some staff

Keep interest in the scheme

Succession planning

Plan how you will cope with the turnover of prisoners. To make sure this goes smoothly you could:

- recruit frequently or accept applications at any time
- encourage new members to shadow existing members
- make handing over duties part of the role
- support the prisoner participants in developing an induction process for new members
- make sure training and development is available at frequent intervals

Top tip

HMP Ford has a dedicated prisoner participation noticeboard where they post their outcomes. They use a 'you said, we did' format (see annexes). They also report updates on issues that are in the process of being resolved. Minutes from meetings are available to prisoners, which makes the process as transparent as the outcomes.

Measure outcomes

While each step outlined in this toolkit plays a key role in your prisoner participation plan, it is this last one that is really the most critical. Because without measuring outcomes, there's little way of knowing if the scheme in your prison is a success. The key is to make sure that outcomes are directly related to the aims you set out in [step 2 on page 5](#).

So how do you measure the outcomes of participation in your prison?

1. Before and after

The simplest way is to do a before and after comparison. For example, if your aim was to reduce complaints, you could compare how many complaints were received in the month before you started the scheme with how many you receive now, or 12 months on.

2. Surveys and questionnaires

Another simple way to track the success of your scheme is to ask staff and prisoners to fill out surveys and questionnaires. You may have existing questionnaires in your prison that you can use for exactly this purpose, such as the 'Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' survey.

You could also consider interviewing staff and prisoners to gauge whether they feel there has been genuine collaboration in decision-making and improvements in service as a result.

Case study HMP Ford

Although HMP Ford has a formal complaints procedure, the OCC has proved to be a faster, less formal and friendlier way of solving prisoner issues.

HMP Ford prisoners who suffered from diabetes raised the issue of a lack of fruit in the canteen. The OCC was able to get a change in the menu including a wider variety of choice.

Also, the OCC influenced the introduction of a new canteen system in response to complaints of long waiting times, bullying and queue jumping.

Top tip

Be realistic – prisoner participation is not a quick win.

Measure outcomes

A snapshot of progress

You don't need to wait 12 months to start gathering intelligence on how well your prisoner participation scheme is being implemented. If you want a snapshot view of progress, consider asking the following questions.

- How many prisoners enquired about the model from the launch and onwards?
- How many applied for advertised vacancies?
- Which roles were most popular among prisoners?
- How many prisoners were suitable for the roles for which they applied?
- How long did the recruitment process take?
- How diverse are your model's participants? Who is or isn't included?
- How diverse are the prisoners who have offered responses, made complaints and suggested improvements?
- What interest is shown by prisoners in the model?
- How many meetings have been held and what was the attendance?
- How many events have subsequently been held?
- How many representatives have resigned – and what reasons did they give?

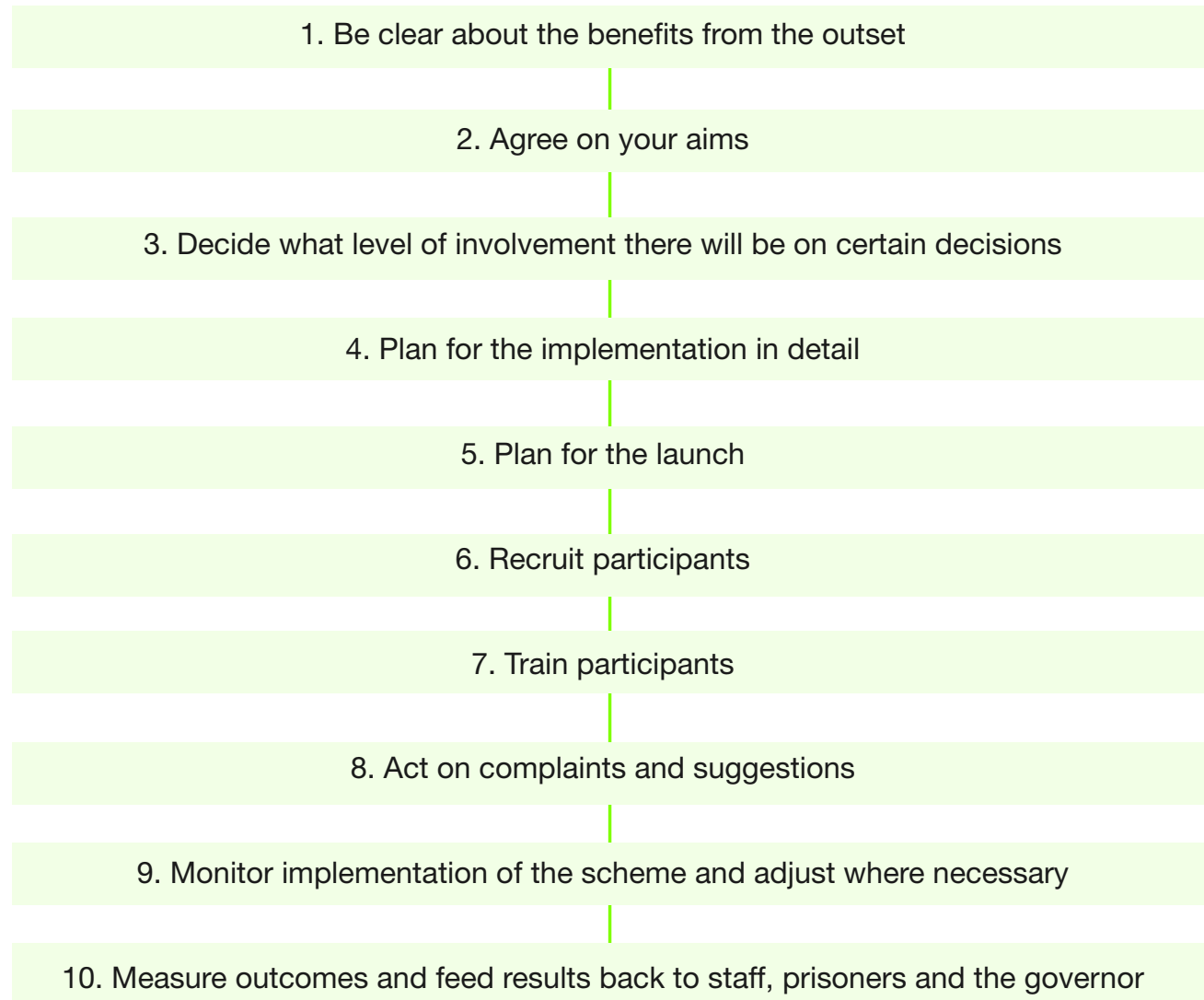
Gauging results

- How many complaints and issues have been raised?
- How many of these have been addressed?
- Why could some of them not be addressed?
- How many subsequent complaints have been made about issues/concerns that have not been addressed?
- Has the overall number of complaints dropped?
- How many decisions have been improved/changed?
- How many services have adapted/changed?
- Have staff or prisoners reported improved communication?

Top tip

Don't forget to show prisoners, staff and the governor what real changes have come about through the scheme.

The steps to prisoner participation at a glance



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