

## Episode 4:

### Title

**Coming Back:** How Vox Liminis uses creative responses to the criminal justice system to build community

### Short description

Vox Liminis is a Glasgow based community organisation using creative practices to think differently about the criminal justice system. Anne Kerr meets Fergus, Alison and Iain to find out more.

### Medium description

How do you build community after the criminal justice system has removed you from society to serve a prison sentence?

Today's episode of Recovering Community explores the work of Vox Liminis, a unique organisation, set up to find creative answers to questions about crime, punishment, reintegration, and community.

Vox is for people who have all kinds of experiences of criminal justice; from children with parents in prison, to academic researchers and social workers. It hosts a number of projects from its base in Glasgow's Gallowgate, *and* in prisons across Scotland.

Anne Kerr meets 3 lynchpins of the Vox community; Fergus McNeill, Alison Urie, and Iain, to learn about the ways that creative work, embracing difference, and mutual support build the bonds of community, and the foundations for a life beyond prison.

Learn more about Vox Liminis here <https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/>

Listen to Vox's latest podcast 'The Art of Bridging' here

<https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/media/?t=podcasts>

# Recovering community ep 4: Vox Liminis

## Anne Kerr

Hello, and welcome to Recovering Community, a podcast about community: what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt.

I'm Anne Kerr, from School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow, and in this series, I've been talking to colleagues, activists, artists and community members, from the Clyde to Colombia about the unique ways they come together to create bonds of commonality and solidarity.

But how do you build community after the criminal justice system has removed you from society to serve a prison sentence?

Today, I'm exploring the work of Vox Liminis, a unique organisation, set up to find creative answers to questions about crime, punishment, reintegration, and community.

Vox is for people who have all kinds of experience of criminal justice; from children with parents in prison, to academic researchers and social workers. It hosts a number of projects from its base in Glasgow's Gallowgate, and in prisons across Scotland

One of those projects is Unbound, a song writing group that meets every Tuesday to share ideas, food and company. That's the focus of today's discussion, and I'd like to start with Iain who is a committed Unbounder. Here's how he would describe Vox.

### Iain

But it's a hard thing to define exactly what Vox is. It's a creative thing that goes on, it's not just always songwriting, which some people might think that that's all that happens. Definitely, is a community, people get to know each other. And over a period of time, you could regard these people as friends, people that you can trust.

### Anne Kerr

For people serving sentences, Vox's work *inside* Scotland's prisons is a key first step to building those bonds of trust and continuing a relationship on the outside, here's Iain again...

### Iain

I first came across Vox when I was in prison. And I knew who they were, before I got involved with them. And even for a couple of years, I seen the work that they were doing before I was... had any inkling to, to do anything really. I think, the first thing that's in your mind in prison is who is these people? You know, very suspicious, people who, who come from the outside, you know, do gooders. But over the years I've seen... I could see people who had attended the sessions, and I could see the great uplifting, you know, almost the spring in the step of leaving the session, they had done something fantastic. They had done a creative piece maybe to send to their son, or daughter or somebody in the family. And maybe for the first time, it might have been the first creative thing they'd actually done in their life. And that must make that person a sorta better person for, for willing to explore their own lives. And it was later on, I got to know them as they were coming into prison. It was much later that I actually done a session with Vox and it was not exactly...it was sort of how I thought it was going to be but not exactly. And it was

really great. Because of that, I started to then visit the Vox office when I was out of prison, and I've been coming here ever since.

### **Anne Kerr**

**How does a project like Vox Liminalis come to life? I'd like to introduce two of the people at its foundations.**

**Fergus McNeill is a colleague of mine and professor of Criminology and Social work at the University of Glasgow. Before his life in academia, he worked in residential drug rehabilitation and as a criminal justice social worker.**

**Fergus and his colleague Alison Urie had been thinking about different ways of approaching rehabilitation...I asked him to tell me the story of how he and Alison's experiences led to the creation of Vox.**

### **Fergus McNeill**

Alison and I met on the board of trustees of a youth organisation in the north of the city. And at the time, I was involved in a project, which was looking at how people move away from offending behavior and towards integration within communities. And also to try to think of ways of changing the criminal justice system and its practices to better support that transition. And we were thinking about the problem that people face when they leave the criminal justice system, which is that they're often met with hostility. So their route back into community and into a place where they can feel a sense of belonging and be supported, is not straightforward. And we were literally in the pub thinking, what could change or engage with the social climate that people face when they come back from punishment, I guess. And Alison had done some previous work with a different organisation in Dundee called Hot Chocolate, where they used songwriting and music making as a way of exploring people's experiences and feelings. So we settled upon the idea of using music to try to improve the quality of conversation and dialogue about crime, punishment, and reintegration. And over the course of about a year, or 18 months from that conversation, Vox Liminalis was set up as a charity to develop creative ways of exploring those questions and building supportive communities around them.

### **Anne Kerr**

**That hostility and struggle was keenly felt by Iain when he was released. And taking the first steps towards a community took courage and commitment.**

### **Iain Vox**

It was sort of difficult for me. When I first started to come to the Vox office, I definitely felt like an outsider. But I was feeling that way everywhere I was going. You know I would be walking along the street and thinking people were looking at me and thinking 'what's he doing out of prison?' as if I had a neon sign above me? I felt out of place. And I felt like everybody that looked at me must have known that doesn't belong in society. Totally alien, you know, so much had changed over the years. So coming into Vox, I brought all that negative thinking and it was...I thought oh, this is a bit...what's going on here? People are too friendly. This is no right. Something's afoot

here, this is, this is dodgy. You cannae have people doing stuff like this. Why is everybody so damn nice about things? This is weird. So you know, I persevered and there was something that was wanting me to come back, I enjoyed aspects of it right away. And there was other bits I was like... 'that's a bit, no right' something's just, it's just a bit too much like kumbaya round the bloody campfire. It's, something's no right here. But I would say, you know, weeks and months sort of went on and you get to know the individuals and everything that's going on. The creative side was, was brilliant. And then it just sort of materialised one day that I thought, I'm actually sort of part of this. I'm no longer the outsider who's a guest invited in. I'm actually part of this. And I feel today that I'm as much a member of this as anybody else. And that's only down to everybody that's here, making me believe that. And that's got to be a good thing.

### **Anne Kerr**

**Creative work relies on trust and communication, and the Vox Liminis team has been finding ways to join dots that would remain otherwise unconnected. Alison Urie is the director of Vox and she knows the power of connection.**

### **Alison Urie**

Starting out with the focus on music, but we've since expanded into other art forms. We've done things like run songwriting projects with people in prison and people in the local community and people who work in the prison like prison officers coming together over, over a few days to make songs together, we find that it leads to people relating in new ways and finding little bits of commonality that they might have not expected. And we've also then found ways to take some of these songs written in processes like that, to the wider public or to groups of practitioners and explore creatively again, in response, what they make of that either as an audience member or themselves as creative makers in it. So, writing songs in response to songs is a fascinating way to bridge a conversation between very different people and share insights and experience and, and bring commonality actually of understanding between folks who might start off thinking they're coming at it from different angles and realise you got more in common than they realise and might be able to work together to find new ways forward.

### **Iain**

I believe even just some of the creative stuff that's been put out there has got to make people think differently. You know, the stuff that's in the media, stuff that's to do with, like criminal justice. There's a huge negative with anything that's there, whether it's guys in prison that are eating massive Christmas dinners, and, you know, they're lounging back and enjoying life and everybody else who's suffering in the world. That's not a correct portrayal of prison life. And it's the same when people come out of prison. There's sometimes, there's people who have, they may have addictions, or they might have, you know, some kind of thing that's just not helpful in their life. And is there anybody there to really assist those people? I believe that Vox does exactly the opposite of what we've seen with certain newspapers. I think, because they're

honest, and because they're willing to look at certain situations, it must benefit everybody. It doesn't matter how terrible the issue is, if you come at it from an honest point of view, it's got to be eye opening to some people that's never thought about things before. There's so many people that, that get prison in this country of ours, but they're still people. They're still people that have come from society and must go back into society. They're still members of the community that they came from, they're still members of this country. I think there's so much that is geared up against people that are coming out of prison, they're just gonna go straight back in. Again, the media up until now hasnae really helped that situation. And I don't see how that helps the wider community. You know, people might no always look at things, you know, it's somebody else's problem. Well, no really, you know, these are people that's comin from everybody's neck of the woods. I would like to see fewer prisons in this country. Rather than us having to build more. Because we're no looking at things that are going wrong in people's lives

### **Anne Kerr**

**I was really struck by Iain's vision for the potential of the creative community that he's part of, and I asked Fergus McNeill and Alison Urie if *their* involvement with Vox had changed their own perceptions of community**

### **Fergus McNeill**

Being involved with Vox, and particularly with the Unbound community has, for one thing, it's created a new community for me. The thing I love most about Unbound is that it's diverse. It spans ages, it spans social classes, it spans backgrounds, and it certainly spans very diverse life trajectories and experiences. The one thing that holds it together is a common interest in making stuff. And what we...what we find generally, is that in the process of making stuff together, we become together, a community. I found that an enormously enriching community to be part of, because it's diverse, because it challenges me all the time, because the things that I might take for granted in a community of people who are like me are questioned here. And so I learn more and develop more from engaging with a diverse group of people here than I think I'm in other contexts.

### **Alison Urie**

My background is in community development, so I've had an interest in communities and community work for a long period of time. Here, we're trying to hold a space where different experience and expertise comes together as more equal, I'm not suggesting that - you know, I'm paid, I lead the organization, I've got power in that - I'm not suggesting that that's exactly the same and shared as it is with everyone else. But we are trying to hold space for each other in a way that is challenging, and different from what I've experienced before. And that is both inspiring and challenging, and really hard. And some of the most difficult times have been trying to hold that diversity together, when, particularly when, when very different and divergent political, or social perspectives come into play and trying to hold a space where people can disagree. And at the same time, respect each other and, and keep moving forward together, while disagreeing with points of view or perspectives on the world. And it's challenging and fascinating to be part of.

## **Fergus McNeill**

In this context anyway, it's not in a specific political cause or a campaign. It's the sort of everyday practices of mutual support and challenge. And that, you know, sometimes that might get political and who knows where we're going next. But at the moment, for me, it's the, it's the solidarity that, that is represented in people caring for each other, and sticking with each other in spite of difference. And in spite of struggles that we face.

## **Anne Kerr**

**No community can exist without disagreement, but their attitude towards diversity of opinion is what will make or break it. Alison has seen the resilience that is generated by moving towards, rather than away from, difference**

## **Alison Urie**

There's a, there's a painting behind us as we talk that came out of a weekend's worth of work when we came together at the end of July with an artist called Richie Cummings. And he facilitated us in a conversation called Painted Visual Arguments. And we spent the weekend deliberately pouring ourselves into things we disagreed on. We got newspapers and went through them at the start of Saturday morning and pulled out things that were controversial that we had opinions on. And we discussed them and deliberately got into groups where we disagreed on things, and then made challenging provocative statements out of these issues that were arising through discussions about the news. And the artwork behind us here is a collage of layers of disagreeing statements that have been written up and painted over and challenged and changed by each other. And I think it's a brilliant picture of some of what we have experienced, particularly in the last 18 months, I think. I think that the constraints of not being able to meet in person and having to communicate in other forms. And the, the connections that we found through supporting each other through the pandemic. And the, I guess some of the the challenges in confidence that have come from, from communicating in different ways, have brought to the fore some of our differences in a way that I think's been very healthy. I think at times we've shied away from naming things that we disagree on. And I think finding ways to increase our recognition of the, of the differences but willingness to respect and stick by each other and learn from each other and keep moving forward has renewed over this past, this past time and it's quite exciting to see where that might take us from here.

## **Anne Kerr**

**Here's Iain again**

## **Iain Vox**

There has been some unbelievable things has arisen because of us this time that we're in. And certainly no being able to meet face to face and having to talk through a computer or a phone... There's been all sorts of things, there's even been keyboard warriors has appeared over, over the period with, with certain things. But that's good. You know, it's better than everybody just pretending. So I would say our community is quite strong. I think everybody that comes here wants to be here. I think we all believe that we're trying to do some kind of good. And that's pretty much what I would say about this wee community.

## **Anne Kerr**

**As much as we don't want this podcast to be all about responses to the pandemic. Covid 19 had a huge impact on the day to day workings of Vox, so I had to ask Fergus and Alison about the challenges *and* opportunities that it presented.**

## **Fergus McNeill**

The first challenge was how to stay connected. That meant moving online. But moving online is not a straightforward thing to do with a community of people who, many of whom are not particularly connected digitally or engaged with those kinds of technologies. So it's easy to say, we went on Zoom, but actually behind that simple statement is a massive amount of effort, and many hours on phones trying to kind of talk people through the business of making a Zoom call work. But one of the sort of funny things at the start of the pandemic was that as soon as we got got on those Zoom calls, at the beginning of the first lockdown, it was the people in the community who'd spent long times in prison who were kind of almost laughing at the rest of us as we struggled to cope with isolation. And we were being isolated in our houses, with all our stuff around us and with our families with us, for the most part. So they were kind of what's all the fuss about this lockdown thing? But at the same time, it was brilliant to have people in your community who have been through real isolation and real lockdown, able to bring the experience of going through imprisonment to bear on helping us make sense. Even things like the management of time, like doing time is something that people in prison have to learn to survive. So that was interesting, because that changed the dynamics in the community. It empowered people with that experience to bring that expertise forward. And we all wanted it, we wanted to learn from it, and to use it. But that's characteristic of the community, like the expert in the room changes depending on what the conversation is, and what the need is. And I really like that dynamic. Sometimes, I'll be mocked as the professor, but also, I like to think to a certain extent respected. And then at other times, I'll just be an average guitar player. And then at another time, I'll be you know, a person talking about parenting adolescents. And so the dynamics of who knows what about whatever the topic of the moment is...shifts constantly. And that's, that's part of the incredible richness of this community.

## **Alison Urie**

Later on in the year, when we'd started trying to find ways to recreate differently, some of our wider reaching work beyond the small community of Unbound, we started trying to experiment with remote songwriting in groups. So while we'd been doing some of that in Unbound throughout, we we then tried to reach beyond ourselves. And we engaged a few people who were maybe serving a community sentence or worked in social work, or in the community, and also a few people who are serving prison sentences to take part with Unbound members in small groups to write songs together. And the discipline of trying to do that from a distance was quite fascinating. And also, I mean, it was hard. But I think we learned a lot about different ways of working that I think we need to take forward. I mean, in essence, in Vox, we're always going to be working with people who are remote. And we have been limited previously by you know, us going to visit and do short projects in prison. We don't need to work like that we can work with better technological tools to keep communication going. And yes, it's slow and frustrating,

but there's a lot of value in it. The first songwriting group that I was part of; the musician facilitating that was in Malmo in Sweden, the group included myself, another regular Unbounder, who lives in the north of the city, a guy who had been referred in by social work last summer, who we'd never actually met, who, who's serving a community sentence, and another person who was serving a prison sentence and we all managed to write together over the course of five or six weeks and write a brilliant song, sharing lyrics back and forth using technology like email a prisoner and texting each other and whatsapping, and occasional Zooms, and phone calls and sort of iteratively shaping and piecing layer on layer on layer of words and music together to create a song. And there's something brilliant about that. And something that I think we need to learn from and take forward in our practice to build community despite distance and physical location.

### **Anne Kerr**

**Vox's Unbound group produced an impressive amount of work during lockdown. And in my conversation with Fergus and Alison, they told me about the way that the 'new normal' changed the tone of the creative conversation. The natural world began to feature much more strongly in everyone's ideas as our daily outdoor time became suddenly more precious.**

**And there's a song that was inspired by an image captured by Unbound member Martin on his daily walk. *Waiting for the Daylight* began life in the remote sessions, and was developed just as face to face contact was being reintroduced.**

**It's a song that Alison, Fergus and Iain are rightly proud of, and I asked them to tell me about its creation**

### **Iain Vox**

Right from the beginning, the image was, was quite something, you know: birds on a wire...

### **Alison Urie**

Martin had clocked these birds sitting on electrical wires, that looked almost like notes on a staff. He clocked that and put that up, and then I played on the piano out the notes, and then uploaded on to Basecamp. - this is all all happening on Basecamp - uploaded the audio recording from my rough piano playing,

### **Iain Vox**

The person that come up with it had the foresight to sort of see that differently. And it, it sparked a whole series of things, you know, there was a whole buzzing on the apps that we use, about what this was. So over the course of a couple of months, you know, it sort of grew arms and legs and ended up being a, I think quite a decent piece to be sort of proud of

### **Fergus McNeill**

I think we took the original photograph of the birds on the wire, and then we just asked people to walk in a circle. And each time they got to me, they had to give me a line, stimulated by, or



provoked by the image. People kept going round in a circle, there was about eight or 10 of us that night, and they went around two or three times. So I probably had 30 lines, on on the flip chart. And then we just paused for a coffee or something and looked for a narrative, or a way of connecting the different lines together. And it's one of those kind of completely mysterious moments of weird symbiosis, that the words that came out, have a meaning greater than any of the lines, and that the old speak collectively, I think, to that experience of waiting for the daylight, and this sense of we're going through something here, there's hope for the future. The resources that we need for the future are here, are among us, in community, in solidarity. And the daylight will come basically. Well I find the overall effect of that just incredibly heartening and uplifting and sort of exactly what was needed for the moment, which is basically to say, we're going to be okay, we're going to hang, hang through this together, and come out the other side. It's just amazing that that all came from Martin taking a photograph. And then this idea bouncing around the group of people exchanging stuff, which I guess is what we've been talking about all the way through.

**Anne Kerr**

[Before we wrap up, I'd like to leave you with Iain, and his thoughts on what it takes to build - \*and maintain\* - a community](#)

**Iain Vox**

The hard thing to think about in the community is...is it perseverance? And it is difficult sometimes, but if you want to improve your life, you must persevere. And it doesn't matter what the obstacles are. You know, I personally have faced some unbelievable obstacles that was put in my way. And at times, I wished I was back inside. And this is just weird being out here, it's just so much easier inside. You must persevere. And I believe I'm a different person from when I was released from prison. I've definitely improved my life. I've changed my thinking, I feel more comfortable in myself. And I can only put that down to the involvement with Vox, and the people and the challenges. And willing to listen to other people's points of view, and being creative. And just thinking about where do I want to be in life? So yeah, perseverance is at the root of everything. You must push yourself. And if you're willing to push yourself as people who's willing to help you

**Anne Kerr**

[Thank you for listening to this episode of Recovering Community.](#)

[I'm Anne Kerr and I'm very grateful to Alison, Fergus and Iain for talking to me. If you're enjoying the series, please subscribe and share](#)

[All the songs featured in this episode were written by members of the Vox Liminalis community. They are used with kind permission and available to stream or buy via Bandcamp, Spotify and the usual outlets.](#)

You can find out more about Vox's projects, events and publications on their website [voxliminis.co.uk](http://voxliminis.co.uk)

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