

Capacity building to improve outcomes for autistic people in prison & probation

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Where did it all begin?



- The National Autistic Society has been providing Autism Accreditation for 25 years
- It's an international quality assurance programme
- With a diverse range of services working towards and working to maintain accredited status
- In 2014, the Consultant Psychiatrist & the Speech, Language & Communication Therapist at HMYOI Feltham contacted the NAS to ask if standards could be developed for prisons
- They had had an autism service since 2012 & wanted to review its impact
- They knew they needed a whole prison approach
- So we set about writing the standards

Prisons Pilot



- Three sets of standards were developed – custody, healthcare & education
- We needed to ensure the standards worked in adult as well as YOI setting
- HMP's Wakefield, Dovegate & Parc were asked to pilot the standards
- Former Minister Andrew Selous visited HMYOI Feltham
- He wrote to all Governors & Directors of prisons in England & Wales
- He also asked us to look at developing standards for probation

NPS North West



- We started working with the National Probation Service in the NW in 2015
- The standards cover all aspects of probation work, including Approved Premises (hostels)
- Autism champions were identified across the region & across roles
- It was decided to focus on Lancashire only. The NW was too large to review confidently. However, champions are still in place across the region and continue to meet

What did we find?

- Staff were making excellent reasonable adjustments, but lacked confidence
- Unsurprisingly, they started to identify many people who hadn't been diagnosed
- They were like sponges! They took on board all training & information and ran with it!
- Staff developed 'who wants to be a millionaire' style quiz, resources regarding sensory sensitivities, display boards etc
- They wanted more help

HMPPS Funding



- 2017-2018 NPS in the NW secured funding to help them improve their practice in relation to autistic people and people with learning disabilities.
- NAS won the tender
- The elements to the project involved:
 - Training on the Care Act, stress & anxiety, offending behavior. Reflective practice sessions & a consultation service were also provided
 - Developing a toolkit of resources
 - Service user group
 - Partnership development
 - Evaluation
- All of this work assisted them in their preparation for their Accreditation review

What was it like for autistic people?



“Ah, it can be quite daunting like I said when you don’t know people so I say if you first meet someone (I can’t really speak about learning disabilities or anything like that) with Asperger’s, that kind of face to face across the desk thing can be difficult. So maybe if it was less intense maybe... if the person isn’t making eye contact with them, **it's not a sign of disinterest or being rude**. It’s because it’s difficult for them to make eye contact and be engaged in a way that they’d expect a normal person to be engaged. It’s just I guess a... **knowing what to expect with people with Asperger’s**... and try not to treat them differently because of how they act, like their body language or whatever.

Examples from your own experience?

I can’t really, but you know... I don’t know what’s in their mind cos only they can tell you that. When they evaluate people, to determine their risk or whatever, it **might prejudice their decision if they think the person isn’t engaging in the way that they should**. But I’d say it’s not always the case that they’re not engaging it's just that they’re not engaging in a way that’s expected of people. It’s difficult, I guess... for people with Asperger’s to show emotion... show remorse and things like that. It doesn’t always come across as well as it might, or it should... but it doesn’t mean it’s not there. **I have always had difficulty with the ... like, displaying my emotions**. I guess talking about the difficult things... it can be quite hard. Obviously, you need to talk about it cos that’s what you’re there for. Sometimes it can be hard to express yourself properly.”

What was it like for autistic people?



“As I said **my overall experience has been pretty good**. I feel very fortunate to have my probation worker... she’s really understanding and helpful and always tries to help out. **She doesn’t take an adversarial role**... it isn’t like a strict relationship, **she’s there to offer a helping hand**. That’s the best way for probation workers to act because it **makes you more willing to engage with them**... than if they’re trying to be strict with you... which I guess can kind of make you disengage.

But the way she engages is brilliant. She just talks to you like an equal really, always tries, helps out...

Again, the **understanding is the key and knowing they understand**; that would be a great help for most people with autism and Asperger’s.”

What was it like for staff?



“I think **doing the training helped me reflect more on how to help** and what the problems were he was having before he was sent back to prison, because he was wasn’t being managed in the community... I think before I would have discussed with the manager and managers would have had him recalled sooner but I think doing the training, working with the project helped me reflect more on ‘let's look at, is it a risk issue or is it something we can try and work with’...and prolonged his return to prison...

I think it **helped me manage him better and help him sort out his anxieties** and frustrations rather and work with him more in the community by keeping him in the community... whereas prior to the training I’d be thinking ‘oh this man is a risk issue’ (which he wasn’t at that point, he did progress to being a risk but..)... we need to sort out getting him into housing , into mental health, adult social care things like that.”

What was it like for staff?



“I’m working with a transgender offender, the particular area of work where I work directly with offenders is in relation to transgender offenders and I was reading through the minutes of the meeting and somebody had remarked that this person had autism. But there was nothing else in there, the whole meeting was **focused around the person's transgender status**, so I was able to write back to people managing him and say ‘actually, I noticed that you said he has autism but you haven’t said how that affects him, what reasonable adjustments he might need’.

So, the training and what I’ve learnt **enabled me to go back and challenge people nicely** but very directly to say **it's not enough to just say this person has autism**, what does that mean , what are you actually going to do about it... these are some of the resources we’ve got...these are some of the ways you might think about autism. So it allows me to reflect more generally on what we need to do as an organisation but also where I’m aware as offender managers are working on cases **I can very directly make an intervention... I’d definitely not had the confidence to do this before.**”

Challenges



“In Preston we’ve got a Criminal Justice Liaison Team whose role is to assess vulnerability of people who arrive in the cells and I’ve had conversation with them about what would they do if they came across somebody who they considered might be autistic.. and the **grim reality is that unless someone is already in a service**, that people are **probably not being picked up** at that stage and we’re then picking them up when they’ve been through the courts and sentenced.... and my **personal opinion is there’s a lot more learning to be done with courts**, magistrates, solicitors, clerks around that whole thing...

We have a target to make sure we undertake 90% of [Pre-sentence] reports on the day. In olden times most often the court would adjourn for the report if they wanted more information in order to sentence, which was for the vast majority of cases as you can imagine... and now it is done on the day. So there's very few to go for a complex pre-sentence report. So the pressure is on in the court setting to do an assessment (an interview of somebody)... so I think it’s quite a difficult environment now...

In fact we had somebody come through yesterday from a community order - **he’s got autism and schizophrenia** and he’s been convicted of breaching his notification requirement. He has been prosecuted and court put him on a community order to us... But when he came in yesterday, the staff who interviewed him were really concerned as **he didn’t appear to understand anything** of what we were saying to him... somehow that **person has slipped right through the system** to my mind. So I’m going to do a bit of work on that and look at what went on there ... but we have **had him on supervision before** and **we made a lot of adjustments...** most of the contacts were at home. We did home visits during the course of the last supervision and realised how bad things were at home for him. He basically didn’t have any furniture and was just barely functioning... I think his mother provides a lot of the care... so it’s a tricky one.”

Challenges



“It was useful because **we could give examples of cases we were struggling with and share our own experiences...** so I could maybe input and say for instance **getting an adult social care assessment and autism diagnosis...** previously that’s something in the past I’d have struggled to challenge and get done... now **I’ve got a lot better understanding** if someone's got autism they’ve got a right to have that adult social care assessment. So sharing that information, how best to go about that...”

“[Partnership working] **Not very good at all**, to be honest. That’s where me and [colleague's name] we’re going to **work together to try and introduce things within the prison**, like so people can get a better understanding.

What would help you though?

Just to get the custody department (they’re the only people experiencing problems with mental health... suicidal thoughts and sometimes violence reduction as well)...if we can get them on board...we’ve got a lot of new staff who have just started here and **I think it would have been an ideal time to introduce something.**” *Probation Officer seconded to prison*

What next?



Presented by Minister Edward Argar



2018-2020 HMPPS Funded Project



- New project to work with NPS across NW with a focus on people who have committed sexual offences
- Working with 5 prisons in Lancashire and Cumbria
- Similar focus to the previous HMPPS funded project
 - Training with reflective practice sessions and consultation service
 - Developing a toolkit of resources
 - Service user group
 - Partnership development
 - Evaluation

Thanks for listening



- CJS pages on NAS website
- Free monthly CJS & autism/LD newsletter

Both available at www.autism.org.uk/cjs

- Criminal Justice Group on Network Autism – professional forum

www.network.autism.org.uk

