Hidden disabilities within the prison system

A new government funded project is investigating the experience of individuals with hidden disabilities in the prison system. Here Clare Hughes, who manages the project for the NAS, shares the current findings

At present little is known about the experiences of adults with autism in the prison system. Are prison staff aware of their inmates on the spectrum? Have they an effective way of assessing the needs of people on the spectrum? And most importantly, how are they meeting these needs?

Thanks to a new government funded project, it looks as though we are moving ever closer to getting those answers. In February 2013, 3SC were commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to improve support for offenders with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD). 3SC and its partners, the British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD), Dyslexia Action and the National Autistic Society are working together to identify good practice in the screening, assessment and delivery of interventions for professionals working in the Criminal Justice System. This learning will be shared widely in early 2014, making an important contribution to the reducing reoffending agenda.

Managing the National Autistic Society’s contribution to the project is Clare Hughes. She said: "each organisation started with a literature review relevant to the disabilities they were representing, looking at what was available. This is now being combined into one document as we want to highlight good practice and share that information."

Next the team sent out a call for examples of good practice, the response from which came as a surprise to Clare: "I was really pleased with the response. There were some really good examples of good practice and very passionate staff," she said, "the majority of prisons aren't doing anything specific but there is some positive work going on; a couple of prisons in the North-West have set up learning disability clinics. They have utilised their local forensic support service to identify individuals with learning difficulties, meet their needs and train staff."

However, Clare maintains that most prisons are still confused around the area of autism. "A lot of prisons aren't confident of what to do; they don't feel they know how to engage with people with autism and they are unsure who to contact for support" she said.

Prison officers are also having difficulty understanding the needs of those with Asperger syndrome. Clare believes that this is due to the individuals’ academic abilities masking their social and emotional challenges. She said: "the more intelligent or articulate the individual, the harder prison officers find it to understand them. Prisons have their own social rules and staff struggle to see why offenders with Asperger syndrome don’t get that."

Clare is also concerned that some inmates on the spectrum would be targets for abuse or exploitation from other prisoners. "As some individuals on the spectrum will insist that not just they, but other offenders as here to the rules in prisons, put themselves into very vulnerable..."
situations," she said, "that vulnerability is always there and there will be people that will exploit those with disabilities.

"It's also not surprising why so many individuals with autism isolate themselves in their cells. When I first went into a prison I was amazed by the level of noise. I can't imagine anyone with sensory issues wanting to come out of their cell in to that."

Looking at how individuals with autism enter the prison system in the first place, Clare believes it’s often the failure of adult services that leads to individuals on the spectrum being prosecuted.

"We have some real issues with social care and health services letting people down, with many individuals being wrongly assessed for services," she said, "in some cases it's tragic that people have ended up in prison, because if someone had intervened earlier it may have been prevented. There aren't enough support networks in place to stop interests, which may have seemed quite innocent in childhood, getting out of hand and leading them to prison when they are older."

It appears that there are also real issues in the rehabilitation of past offenders on the spectrum too, with many not receiving adequate support to be re-integrated into society.

"One of the big things we need is a joint approach. These individuals need support from people who understand their disabilities and needs. All the organisations have a part to play in the rehabilitation of people on the spectrum and we need to work together. We will never stop people re-offending if we don’t work with them and explain things in a way that makes sense to them."

Case Study: HMP Parc, South Wales

HMP Parc in Bridgend accommodates 1038 convicted men and young offenders as well as those on remand and awaiting trial. Run by the G4S group, the prison is a strong example of inclusive practice within the prison system today, and that inclusivity begins from the moment a new inmate walks through the prison gates.

"The prison have a screening tool which they use on everyone entering the prison," says Clare, "it identifies needs and produces a report to show how best to work with these individuals. Autism may well be identified at this stage."

This information has been fundamental in the prison's research into the prevalence of inmates with learning difficulties as well as social and communication issues. The findings of this research will also shed some light into the varying needs of inmates across the country.

Besides having four learning disability nurses, the prison has also instigated a successful mentor programme. Clare said: "mentors are given learning disability training. They look at how much support individuals would need and when they would need a mentor. It might be for something specific, such as help with education, some may need help with trying to build some structure into unstructured times."
On top of all this, the prison have tasked a member of staff to transfer all of the prison literature into easy-read formats, to make them more accessible to those with learning disabilities.

Clare also believes that it's the staff training at Parc that has made the lion-share of difference. "At Parc they've invested a lot of time and resources into training their staff," said Clare, "it's made a difference to prison officers who have realised that in some cases they may have escalated situations by unwittingly responding in the wrong way. There is little we can do to change the prison environment for individuals on the spectrum, but Parc have shown that by providing staff with information, training and support from trained staff can make a huge difference for people with learning disabilities, including people with autism."

For more information on this topic please visit: http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/criminal-justice.aspx

Free downloadable publication: Autism, a guide for criminal justice professionals


Prison and ASDs


Save the date:

The 13th international conference on offenders with intellectual and developmental disability, Northumbria University, Newcastle, 10-11 April 2014

This conference is recognised as the foremost opportunity, in the UK and internationally, for reflection and sharing for services providing care for offenders with a learning disability (LD) and/or developmental disabilities, including autism, both in the public and independent health and social care sectors and the criminal justice system.