

Impact of LD/ASC specific training for North West National Probation Service (NPS) staff

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11th April 2019

Background



In July 2017 the **National Probation Service (NPS)** began working with the **National Autistic Society (NAS)** on a project funded by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), aimed at improving services for offenders with learning disabilities and autism.

- One key component - to develop, pilot and roll out **LD/ASC specific training** to improve understanding of autism amongst 20 NPS staff within the North West cluster.
- The process involved an assessment of staff training needs and **tailoring of training materials to the probation context.**
- Topics covered included LD/ASC in the criminal justice system, sensory issues, stress and anxiety, navigating the social care system and applying frameworks such as the care act.

Evaluation objectives



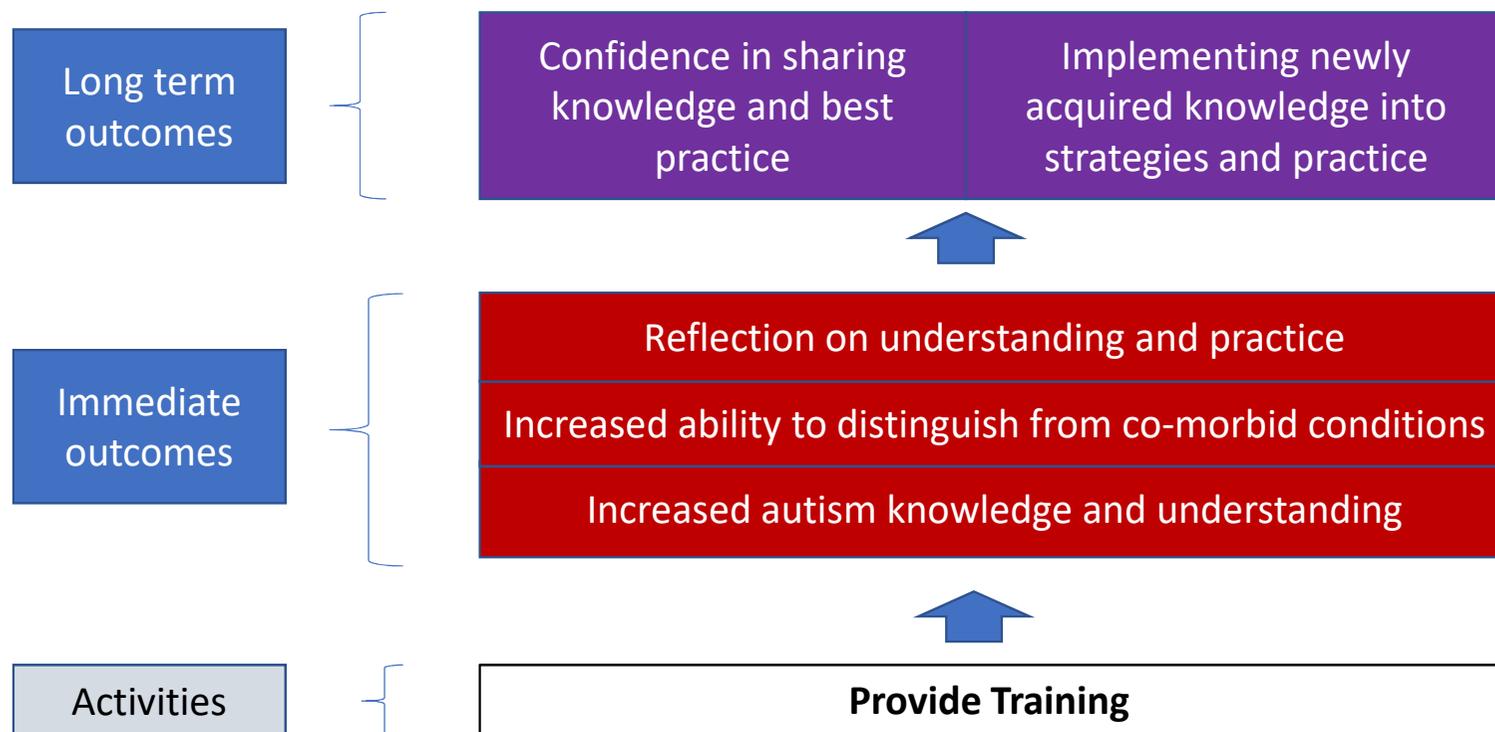
- (1)** Measure *improvement* in **knowledge, understanding** and **confidence** of NPS staff (including Autism Champions) **six months after delivery of training**
- (2)** To **compare** feedback of experience with a **cohort of non-trainees**
- (3)** To **consult service users** on their experience within the service along with their suggestions to improve future training.

Qualitative methodology



- ❑ Key elements of **Theory of change** (ToC) used to inform structure of **topic guides**
- ❑ Guide of 8 questions (with prompts) devised for trainees and a concurrent guide of 6 questions for a comparison cohort of non-trainees
- ❑ **Telephone interviews** (n-13) were undertaken with trainees and non-trainees between June-August 2018 (*six months after training*)
- ❑ Service users (n-4) were consulted by telephone
- ❑ **Participant information sheets** and **consent forms** were provided for service users
- ❑ **Thematic analysis** of interview transcripts was undertaken

Topic guide informed from Theory of change (ToC)



Summary of themes – knowledge, confidence and practice



High satisfaction of delivery, format and relevancy

Deeper insight and confidence in distinguishing autism from co-morbid conditions

Consolidation of current knowledge and increased confidence in experienced staff

Longer term impacts on best practice for individuals and teams

Understanding the motivations for offending



“It really brought home to me things like how we might **misunderstand people's motivation for offending**. So I understood that it would be stressful and anxious coming to work with probation and that some of our processes and procedures ... but one thing that really struck me on the training was that we might be misinterpreting people's motivation for offending, and that for example is **related to a special interest** it might be really difficult for us to move them away from a special interest which links to offending...”- **Equality Manager**

Adapting approaches through improved understanding



What I've been able to do is **alter my way of working with people**. On first meeting **giving that structure on what to expect**, of what will happen during the appointment...trying to keep the appointments at a regular time, on the same day...Sort of changing work I might do in supervision, so for instance **in the past I'd often talk about victim awareness**, now that I have a better understanding...one particular case I'm thinking of would say 'well I don't know, I don't know it could affect me...' and in **the past I might have thought that he was being a bit difficult** or awkward..." – **Probation Officer and Autism Champion**

Adapting approaches through improved understanding



“So, **for example** we talked on the course about somebody who was **collecting pornographic images**, cartoon images of a child and couldn't understand why that was wrong because that wasn't a real person who was being affected. So we might **take a different approach** with that person than we would with somebody else without autism or with a different condition because their **understanding might be different.**” - **Equality Manager**

Confidence in sharing knowledge and best practice



“I manage a team of probation officers and probation service officers so I’ve shared the information with information with members who have actually been trying to influence care act assessments. So there are two cases within the team where I’ve spoken to the probation officer involved and shared the information with them and they’ve been able to use it to **challenge the need for adult social care involvement.**

I’ve also shared on information about **how assessments can be accessed.**” – **Senior Probation Officer and Autism champion**

Summary of themes - barriers and limitations



No limitations regarding resources accessed on the training

General barriers e.g. accessing provisions in the community and diagnostic referral

Specific barriers e.g. lack of infrastructure for accessing resources in prisons

Other examples e.g. reasonable adjustments in court services

Lack of infrastructure in prisons for accessing advice and resources



“I'd like to see how we can set it up in Preston in the prison environment, like they did at Feltham/Wakefield...just have some contact with **someone who'd like share their knowledge and get things up and running** (I don't mean plagiarise their work), just get things off the ground initially and share their experiences and best practice afterward. We could then take on champions ourselves here, get other people interested and on-board. There's lots of young staff who are up to working and are interested and they won't have their own beliefs, feelings like 'it will never get off the ground', so why bother, a lot of people are defeatist before they start.” - **Offender Supervisor**

Barriers - accessing community provisions and diagnostic referrals



“There is an issue with access to services and we **can do more to share the knowledge about how people access assessments** for one.

Because it isn't something people are involved in on a day to day basis and so in terms of sustaining that knowledge I do think there's more we can do...

In terms of support, I think since we've been involved with the autism project, we've got a few more avenues for support than we used to have in the past.

There **doesn't seem to be a vast amount of community provision support.**” - **Senior Probation Officer and Autism Champion**

Summary of themes – the comparison cohort



Confirmed the need for **specialist training** and **consistent access** to resources

Would like instruction on how to **apply needs assessment tools**

Would like the opportunity to undertake **reflective practice sessions** and a **tailored practical approach**

Service users' consultation



High satisfaction with the support they have received

Recommendations for future adjustments and training:

- ✓ Reducing time in the waiting room
- ✓ Awareness of the issue around misinterpreting lack of engagement as non-compliance
- ✓ Understanding potential difficulties in verbalising
- ✓ Managing meltdowns

Overall positive experience of support through understanding



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

Awareness around misinterpretation of body language in autistic service users



“I say if you first meet someone (I can’t really speak about Learning Disabilities or anything like that) with Asperger’s, that kind **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.” – **service user**

Reflections on our process



Effectiveness of approach

- ✓ Topic guide for follow up interviews informed by Theory of Change elements
- ✓ Small cross section of probation staff and service users were **relatively accessible** by email and telephone.
- ✓ **Rich qualitative data** yielded for in depth analysis and reporting.

Main challenges

- ✓ **Lack of mixed methods** data to provide holistic insight as well as more in depth analysis.
- ✓ **Unable to analyse quantitative data** from 'before and after training questionnaires' due to partial completion and **low response rate**.
- ✓ Recruiting for a comparison cohort.
- ✓ Overlap with accreditation process delaying timing of evaluation

Refining methods for next phase of the evaluation



- ✓ **Mandatory** for specified trainee and non-trainee cohorts to complete questionnaires on knowledge, skills, confidence and application to practice, to **ensure large sample size** for statistical analysis.
- ✓ Options to ensure questionnaire completion could be undertaken face to face at monthly meetings, over the telephone and at training sessions.
- ✓ Successful establishment of **service user** and **HMPPS stakeholder advisory groups** as points of contacts for participant recruitment, monitoring and review of progress.
- ✓ **Upscaling the evaluation** to other contributing elements including access to written toolkit resources, the consultation service and reflective practice sessions.