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# Autism training for prison officers in the Scottish Prison Service

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# Outline



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- Highlight current understanding of autism, crime and prison
- Investigate the autism knowledge of prison staff
- Highlight some of the difficulties to delivering training in prison
- Identify what training may be required and how best this can be delivered

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# Autism and Crime



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- **Prevalence – no clear picture**
- **Lack of forensic screening tool**
- **Co-morbidities within offender population**
- **Offender characteristics – autistic and neurotypical**
  - Lack of robust social networks
  - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
  - Low educational attainment
  - Employment issues

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# Autism in prison



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- **Vulnerabilities**
  - More likely to be bullied / exploited (Myers, 2004)
  - Often have unique set of needs (Paterson, 2007)
  - Receiving negative attention from staff (McCarthy, et al, 2016)
  - Isolation / transfers (Allely, 2015)
  - Lack of suitable programmes for rehabilitation (Allen et al, 2008)
- **Autistic individuals in prison seen as higher risk and more vulnerable – BUT often not diagnosed**

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# Staff Understanding



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- **Little research on understanding by staff**
  - Myers (2004) reports lack of knowledge amongst staff
  - Browning & Caulfield (2011) 90% of CJS staff lack adequate understanding of autism
  - Robinson et al (2012) reports lack of knowledge and understanding
  - Prison Reform Trust (Talbot & Riley, 2007) identifies need to support staff in their understanding
- **One study on staff knowledge (McAdam, 2009)**

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# Study Aims



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1. Identify autism knowledge amongst staff at HMP Low Moss;
2. Identify specific difficulties for autistic prisoners and officers;
3. Identify what the training needs for prison officers are;
4. Identify how SPS training managers propose a training programme may be delivered.

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# Methods – Staff Survey



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- 43 participants, mean age 38.38 years (SD = 11.64)
- All currently employed at HMP Low Moss
- Wide range of positions, working throughout the prison
- Completion of Knowledge Questionnaire, adapted from McAdam (2009)
- 15 questions in total: 2 demographic, 3 qualitative, 10 quantitative.

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# Methods - Interviews



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- **Semi-structured interviews**
  - 5 interviews completed in total
  - All participants currently working with autistic adults in prison
- **Focus Group**
  - A total of 5 participants attended the focus group at SPS College
  - All participants were currently employed as learning managers in the SPS

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# Results – Staff survey



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- 100% indicated they had never received autism training
- 96% felt sensory environment may be difficult
- 91% felt autistic prisoners would have specific needs
- 83% felt additional communication support required
- 79% thought autistic prisoners may experience higher stress

*“They process sensory information in a different way”*

*“What can be done to support prisoners with autism”*

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# Results – Interviews



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## Three overarching themes identified within transcripts:

1. Autistic individuals in custody have specific vulnerabilities.
2. Issues directly related to training content / aims.
3. Specific organisational issues impacting training and autistic individuals.

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# Theme 1



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*“The sound bounces of every single wall, there’s very little natural light, there’s the constant shouting, prisoners shouting at prisoners, officers shouting at officers, it feels like people are constantly cleaning and you can smell cleaning products, or you can smell the meals being prepared.”*

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# Theme 2



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*“The thing for me is, even if we can just give staff a little bit of information that makes them think, that’s really odd that he’s responding in this way. I’m not even bothered if they think, is that autism, as long as they think, could there be another reasons as to why this person is behaving in this way and I’m going to raise that with somebody.”*

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# Theme 3



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*“As far as the officers are concerned, even as simple as somebody needing their own cell, not sharing can be quite difficult. It would need buy-in, much further up the chain, so you’re looking to get your governors and deputy governors informed and on-side.”*

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# Results – Focus Group



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## Two overarching themes identified within transcripts:

1. Organisational difficulties, making delivery of autism training more difficult
2. Disseminating information in alternative ways / using current content

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# Theme 1



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*“We kind of respond to strategy, SPS strategy or Scottish Government strategy and so the youth and the woman strategies are a really important driver for what we are doing at the moment...”*

*“...they need to first view it as a problem, which I suppose is maybe part of the obstacle...”*

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# Theme 2



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*“I do think there is a tendency to think, oh we need training for this. Training obviously is an important part of how we want to support our staff, but there are loads of other things that you can do. That poster, or leaflets in the canteen, or whatever, or something that pops up on your homepage when you lock your computer screen. It may say, do you recognise these behaviours, are you presented with these behaviours,...”*

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# Discussion



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- Previous studies highlight a lack of staff knowledge, leading to vulnerabilities (Allely, 2015).
- Current study found good staff awareness, but a possible difficulty with applying knowledge.
- Need for more context specific understanding of autism.
- Training should focus on recognition of difference and practical solutions.

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# Discussion



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- Emphasis on one area may not be most effective way to approach.
- Limited training time means other ways of 'teaching' needed.
- Use of values-based training module, with area specific campaigns on regular basis:
  - Posters
  - 60 second e-learning / MYLO
  - Additional visual resources

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# Future Research



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- Mapping current training and activity across the prison estate
- Further research around autistic crime narratives, to allow better understanding of motivation / reason
- Development of a forensic screening tool, applicable in prison environment
- Establish prevalence

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# Questions?

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# References



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