

# *'I'm Not Even Bothered if they Think, is that Autism?': An Exploratory Study Assessing Autism Training Needs for Prison Officers in the Scottish Prison Service*

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*Abstract: Previous studies indicate that autistic individuals can experience increased distress in prison, leading to significant disruption in the prison regime and difficulties in rehabilitation (Allely 2015; Allen et al. 2008). This exploratory study investigates autism knowledge and training needs among prison officers. Current understanding, possible training content and a strategy for implementation of autism training for officers are all explored. Methods utilised include a survey and interviews/focus group. Themes identified include specific vulnerabilities, staff skill, training needs and implementation barriers. Participants showed some awareness, but lacked understanding of autism in a prison setting. This article explores whether focused training on one condition is problematic, due to limited resources within the prison system. A wider focus on practical skills to supporting people with neurodiverse conditions and links with non-prison-based local health services is seen as more effective than focusing on individual diagnosis within a prison setting.*

**Keywords:** autism; prison; Scotland; training

The identification and management of vulnerable prisoners has been identified as an important area for the criminal justice system across the UK (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2018; Kirby and Gibbon 2018). This is particularly true for neurodiverse people in prison, with autistic individuals often being the biggest subgroup identified. Research suggests that a diagnosis of autism may increase an individual's vulnerability to becoming involved with the criminal justice system, both as a

victim of crime or an offender (Allely 2015; Berryessa 2016; Cashin and Newman 2009).

Contributing factors to an increased risk include social naiveté, difficulties with social situations, obsessional interests, difficulties with change and problems with behavioural planning (Helverschou *et al.* 2015; Robertson and McGillivray 2015). There have been suggestions that behaviours associated with autism are misinterpreted within the criminal justice system and autistic individuals may consequently be considered to lack remorse (Allen *et al.* 2008; Berryessa 2016).

Exact prevalence rates are difficult to establish, with estimates across the criminal justice sector ranging from 3% to 27%, compared with an estimated rate of 1% in the general population (Fazio, Pietz and Denney 2012; King and Murphy 2014). There is concern that a high proportion of undiagnosed autistic individuals within prison may lead to potential difficulties around rehabilitation, management and the future risk of reoffending (Ashworth 2016). It has been found that autistic people in prison are more likely to require intensive support, be disruptive to regimes and receive more adjudications against them (Allely 2015; Myers 2004; Robinson *et al.* 2012).

This study explores autism in custodial settings, the level of staff knowledge and how a training programme may be implemented. It argues that a specific focus on a singular condition is not viable within the limited resources available. A focus on neurodiversity in general, with alternative ways of disseminating information is recommended.

### **Autistic Experiences of Prison**

Only three published studies have investigated the experiences of autistic people within a custodial setting, relying generally on low numbers of participants. Overall, the findings identified specific vulnerabilities and support needs, though only Myers (2004) identified a training need for prison officers.

Paterson (2008) formulated two case studies using interpretative analysis of qualitative data. The study utilised semi-structured interviews, prison records and observations. Individuals were found to be socially naïve, leading to an increased vulnerability. Paterson (2008) highlights how autistic people in custody would attract frequent reports for misdemeanours and become easily frustrated when routines were disturbed. Individuals were the victims of bullying within the prison environment (Paterson 2008). The small sample size and case study approach of this research significantly limits the conclusions that can be made in relation to other prison settings.

Allen *et al.* (2008), conducting a study in South Wales, investigated the experiences of autistic individuals in the criminal justice system. The study gathered evidence from six individuals, through a series of questionnaires, followed by semi-structured interviews. Accounts of prison experience appeared to vary, rather than being overwhelmingly negative. Participants described prison life as being difficult, due to a lack of activity, no access to family and difficulties developing relationships. There were, however,

a number of areas described as being positive, such as being moved into smaller wings, a more rigid structure and having specific contacts in prison (Allen *et al.* 2008). Results of this study are limited, due to the small sample size and use of self-report methods by participants. Neither Paterson (2008), nor Allen *et al.* (2008) explored the autism training needs or knowledge of prison officers working with autistic individuals

In Scotland, Myers (2004) conducted a study on individuals with a learning disability and/or autism in secure facilities. The study indicated that autistic individuals in prison are seen as multiply disadvantaged (Myers 2004). It was found that they were at risk of bullying, exploitation and being ostracised by others. Overall, it was felt that prisons, and prison officers in particular, were ill-equipped for managing and rehabilitating autistic prisoners due to a lack of understanding.

### **Autism Awareness across Criminal Justice Professionals**

The lack of awareness of autistic needs by professionals has been identified as a factor in a lack of appropriate support and rehabilitation for autistic people. Browning and Caulfield (2011) suggest that up to 90% of criminal justice professionals in the UK lack an adequate understanding of autism. This leads to staff demonstrating a lack of empathy, and individuals being misunderstood, viewed as cold or calculating, and regarded as being remorseless. Further studies found a potential for autistic individuals to be labelled as difficult or disruptive, leading to increased reports being placed on them and adversely affecting their future outcomes (McCarthy *et al.* 2016; Michna and Trestman 2016).

To date, only one study has explored the autism knowledge of prison officers. McAdam (2009) used a survey questionnaire to assess the knowledge of staff at a UK prison. She found that a large number of prison officers were unaware of working with autistic offenders. This contrasts with a large number of staff (80%) who believe that autistic individuals suffer from higher levels of stress. The study indicates that, although prison officers have an awareness of autism, this is not easily translated into daily practice and a deeper understanding of autism in prison. In particular, autism theory was poorly retained, with more general strategies being seen as more effective (McAdam 2009).

A number of Scottish initiatives have highlighted the need for prison staff to have an awareness of vulnerability within a prison setting. A report from HMP Barlinnie emphasised a need for an understanding of the specific needs of autistic offenders (Gallagher and Rooke 2007). Similarly, the National Health Service Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHS-GCC) prison health care report highlights the need for autism awareness training for all prison staff as a priority (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde 2014). A Scottish Government (2018) consultation on the Autism Strategy for Scotland identified the criminal justice system as an area of priority, with awareness of the condition among frontline staff seen as one area of importance (Scottish Government 2018). These initiatives highlight an increased need for better awareness of autism by prison staff, although

TABLE 1  
*Participants Completing the Survey*

Role in prison	n	Educational attainment	n
Programmes officer	4	No information provided	2
Operations officer	8	Standard grades	2
Through care officer	2	GCSE	1
Chaplain	1	Highers	7
Prison manager	8	O-level	6
Reception officer	2	A-level	1
First line manager	5	City & Guilds	2
Mental health nurse	2	Higher National Certificate	3
Residential officer	5	Higher National Diploma	8
Security manager	2	BA (Hons)	10
Addictions nurse	2		
Physical education	2		

no study has investigated how this may be achieved within a prison setting.

The current study examined the autism-specific training needs for prison officers working within the Scottish Prison Service (SPS). The aims included establishing autism awareness among staff at a Scottish prison; identifying the specific difficulties for autistic prisoners and prison officers, as identified by professionals working with autistic individuals; and what the specific training needs for prison officers are.

### Methods

The study utilised a range of methods to collect and analyse data, including a survey of 43 frontline officers working in one SPS prison, five single interviews of individuals working directly with autistic people in custody, and a focus group of five training managers within the SPS College. The total number of participants for this study was 53. The survey returns of 43 represents 16% of the 266 frontline officers employed within the prison at the time of data collection. This mix in qualitative and quantitative data collection allows for a deeper understanding of the subject.

#### *Participants*

All participants worked directly with the prison population, had a mean age of 38.38 years (SD = 11.64) and a wide range of positions and educational background (see *Table 1*). Participants were recruited over a total of three days, with the researcher approaching officers while in the prison establishment and asking them to complete the survey.

Five participants were recruited for individual interviews, based on their previous work in prison with autistic offenders. Participants had a wide range of backgrounds (*Table 2*). Five were recruited for the SPS focus group, all currently employed at the SPS College, which takes

TABLE 2  
*Participants Recruited for Interviews and Focus Group*

Participant number	Role	Type
1	Consultant psychiatrist within two prisons, running autism and ADHD clinics	Interview
2	Manager for an autism charity working with prisons to support autistic offenders	Interview
3	Learning disability nurse leading a health care project in three prisons	Interview
4	Psychologist leading a training project for a charity within English and Welsh prisons	Interview
5	Criminal justice lead for an autism charity working to support prisons.	Interview
6	Learning and development manager, with previous experience of working with young offenders	Focus group
7	Researcher supporting work on the proposed SPS prison officers' diploma	Focus group
8	Learning and development manager, with previous experience of young offenders, protections, adult prisoners	Focus group
9	Learning and development manager, with previous experience of working with young offenders and adult prisoners	Focus group
10	Learning and development manager, with previous experience of working in a female prison and case management	Focus group

responsibility for training within the SPS. Recruitment was through the SPS Research Access and Ethics Committee (RAEC), which organised the focus group participants and location. In consultation with the SPS, a focus group was deemed most suitable to engage with a larger number of SPS College participants. All participants had previous experience of working within a prison environment (*Table 2*).

### *Materials*

A questionnaire based on the survey used by McAdam (2009) was developed for officers. It consisted of 15 questions, two around the current role within the prison and educational attainment. Questions 4 and 5 required a 'yes/no' or 'don't know' format answer, questions 3, and 8 through to 13 required participants to rate statements on a five-point Likert scale (Likert 1932). Question 14 asked officers to indicate sensory areas that may cause difficulties and questions 6, 7 and 15 asked for written answers around autism definition, training and other relevant information.

The interview schedule for semi-structured interviews consisted of five questions. Questions were generated prior to the interviews and centred on themes identified in the literature. Follow-up questions were based on participants' answers provided during the interview. Questions were

centred on working with autistic prisoners, delivering training in a custody setting, content of training and any barriers to learning.

The interview schedule for the focus group consisted of a total of ten questions, generated prior to the focus group taking place. Common themes around training and barriers to the delivery were presented to the participants in the focus group, alongside relevant questions. Themes centred on current training, covering: autism; how autism may be incorporated in the curriculum; how barriers may be overcome; and what autism awareness may look like in the SPS.

### *Procedure*

Full ethical approval was received from the University of Huddersfield's ethics committee and the SPS RAEC prior to the study. The RAEC appointed a link person for the researcher to ensure access to prison facilities.

Participants for the questionnaire were recruited within the prison, during their normal working day. All officers working on any of the three particular days were invited to participate, with the researcher visiting each part of the prison at the start of the early and late shifts. Participants were informed about the research aims and provided with an information sheet, consent sheet, the questionnaire, and a debriefing sheet. After introducing the study, participants were asked to complete and return one consent sheet. The questionnaire was left with participants in the particular unit in which they worked, with completed forms to be put into the sealed envelope provided and left at the main desk for collection. Completed surveys were received from all residential units, the medical centre and educational services within the prison.

Interviews took place either over the phone ( $n = 3$ ) or face-to-face ( $n = 2$ ). All interviews were recorded, using standard digital dictaphones, and transcribed by the main author. Flyers were distributed among prison health care teams and local forensic psychology teams. Participants who came forward were provided with an information sheet, outlining the aims of the research and providing general information. A consent sheet was emailed to all participants and a signed copy returned prior to the interview taking place. After the interview, a debriefing sheet was provided to all participants.

Five participants took part in a focus group for training managers based at the SPS College. Flyers advertising the study were distributed among all Learning and Development (L&D) Managers. Within the SPS, L&D Managers hold responsibility for identifying specific training needs for officers, designing training products and the delivery of training. A date was agreed and a room made available in the SPS College. On the day of the interview, half an hour prior to the focus group taking place, all participants were given an information sheet and were asked to complete a consent form and return this to the researcher. The focus group lasted for two hours and was recorded using two recording devices. After the focus group, all participants were provided with a debriefing sheet.

### *Analysis*

Quantitative data were represented as percentages, with the categories 'agree/strongly agree' and 'disagree/strongly disagree' combined in the data. Qualitative questions (6, 7 and 15) were coded to identify overarching themes. Quotes from the answers were selected to illustrate themes.

Data from interviews and the focus group were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis in QSR International's NVivo 11 software. Analysis followed the six-phase model suggested in Nowell *et al.* (2017), with phase 1 consisting of familiarisation with the data, followed by the generating of initial codes from the data in phase 2. Themes were identified and developed in phase 3 based on the codes generated and literature reviewed, allowing for a triangulation of data. Overarching themes were identified and relevant quotes selected to illustrate these during phases 4 and 5, then translated into the research report in phase 6. Following this model has been identified as contributing towards a more robust use of thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.* 2017).

## **Results**

### *Staff Questionnaire Data*

Participants had good basic knowledge of autism, especially around core behavioural features used in diagnosis. Twenty-seven (63%,  $n = 43$ ) of the participants reported that they did not believe they had worked with an autistic individual, while 16 (37%,  $n = 43$ ) indicated that they had. All 43 (100%,  $n = 43$ ) participants indicated that they had never received autism training.

In relation to the needs of autistic individuals, 38 (88%,  $n = 43$ ) participants felt that autistic prisoners differ in their particular needs. Thirty-four participants (79%,  $n = 43$ ) thought that autistic prisoners experience higher levels of stress in custody and 35 (81%,  $n = 43$ ) felt that additional communication support was required. In relation to therapeutic work in prison, 30 (70%,  $n = 43$ ) participants felt that this may be an area of difficulty for autistic prisoners, while 13 (30%,  $n = 43$ ) did not feel that they could answer that specific question. A total of 41 (95%,  $n = 43$ ) participants felt that autistic prisoners may struggle with aspects of the environment and 27 (63%,  $n = 43$ ) felt that autistic prisoners required additional protection and support. Participants were asked to highlight the senses in which an autistic individual may experience difficulties. Participants identified body awareness, touch and sounds as being most difficult.

### *Staff Qualitative Data from the Questionnaire*

Participants' written answers to the questionnaire further support the view of a good basic understanding of autism and neurodiversity as a whole, while highlighting gaps in their applied knowledge of presentation and support needs of autistic people in a custodial setting. It underlined the general confusion around autism and other conditions, with participants using different diagnostic terminology interchangeably. In attempts to

define autism, participants frequently highlighted the specific communication needs and how these impact social interaction abilities. One participant summarised autism as ‘a social communication disorder, which causes the person to struggle in certain social situations’. While a second highlighted the comprehension aspect of difficulties as ‘a difficulty in understanding and interacting in social situations’.

A preference to repetitive and fixed patterns was identified as a key feature, with participants focusing on the difficulty of managing change, summarised by one participant as ‘where the individual does not like change to their routine or environment’. The identification of sensory processing difficulties in relation to autistic people was highlighted, but in a more generic manner, such as a participant writing that autistic people ‘process sensory information in a different way’, with no further explanation as to what this may mean for their experience of prison.

The overlap and confusion around autism-specific needs and general neurodiversity was evident in some answers, with participants describing autism as ‘a general term for someone with specific learning and behavioural issues’, or using other neurodevelopmental diagnosis interchangeably for autism. One participant summarised autism as a combination of diagnoses: ‘An attention deficit spectrum disorder. A mental health issue. A learning disability’.

Answers highlight the need for more practical autism knowledge, related to the custody setting. Participants expressed the wish to learn more about how autism could impact an individual in prison and what practical strategies could be used. Participants felt that a better understanding of presentation was key to identification: ‘... more about autism and how to identify the symptoms and how to properly interact with the individual’, with a second theme being around practical strategies that could be used: ‘Possible struggles being incarcerated, issues individuals may face in prison, tools and help they may require, ...’. Of interest is the focus on identification of support needs and strategies by officers, being less interested in clinical definitions. This could point to a need for wider understanding of neurodiversity, rather than a focus on a single diagnosis.

#### *Qualitative Data from Interviews and Focus Group*

Three themes emerged from the data:

- (i) Specific behaviours and vulnerabilities of autistic individuals in custody;
- (ii) Staff training and skills; and
- (iii) Barriers related to training and implementation.

All participants discussed the unique vulnerabilities of autistic people in custody, making reference to core features of autism diagnostic frameworks. Communication was identified as a primary area of difficulty for autistic people, especially understanding of complex information in a prison environment. One participant recounted the additional stress of communication and understanding within a busy prison environment,



stating that ‘when you are in this noisy environment, all you can focus on is to shut yourself down. So any communication coming to you from externally, it’s not going to get through’.

Similarly, social interaction and building relationships within the prison was seen as difficult. Participants stressed the vulnerability to being taken advantage of, especially in interactions with other prisoners. Autistic people were seen as more vulnerable when compared with others, being manipulated by other prisoners into breaking prison rules:

They’re certainly more vulnerable, both in terms of being taken advantage of and appearing to be different. Possibly more open to manipulation by other prisoners, you can sometimes find autistic prisoners are either overly trusting or fail to read people’s intentions. To an outsider, it may be obvious that what we call ‘mate crime’ [befriending a vulnerable person with the intent of exploiting them] is occurring ...

This abuse of vulnerability and difficulty in reading others’ body language and communicative intent was identified as significant by all participants. Additionally, an increased rate of confusion and anxiety, rooted in difficulties with inflexibility and change, was described. One participant described it in the following way:

The other thing that comes up time and time again, is the rules. So, for lots of people it’s like, finally I’ve come somewhere with rules written down in black and white, this is what should happen and then you see people are paying no attention to that.

This lack of understanding ‘grey areas’ within the prison rules and how they might be applied differently was emphasised by participants. This was manifested by some officers being unable to understand the need for routine and the difficulty in dealing with change experienced by autistic people:

... some prison officers couldn’t quite understand that people were very literal about an instruction they had maybe been given the night before, that people would need to engage themselves in similar routines at similar times of the day.

Managing sensory differences within a custodial environment was deemed as difficult for autistic people, with several issues highlighted, including the lighting, how people interacted within the environment, down to the smell of cleaning materials and meal preparation:

The sound bounces off 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.

The combination of these difficulties in communication and interaction, the preference for repetitive and predictable actions, and the difference in sensory processing identified, was interpreted as placing a significant amount of stress on the autistic individual. This was thought to increase anxious behaviours, leading to an overly punitive response by prison officers inexperienced in working with autistic individuals. One participant summarised it using an example from their own practice:

It was his kind of fidgety, restless, looking edgy and the prison officers interpreting that he was about to blow his top. Thinking they were pre-empting that, they would jump on him and cart him off to the seg [segregation unit] ...

A second participant emphasised the lack of understanding of effective communication ability, masking existing difficulties in social interaction. They described how officers would question the person's motivation for actions, which may cause longer-term problems for the autistic person in custody:

I've had loads of members of staff say, but he's smart enough to know that's going to wind people up, and he's got an autistic person who's trying to make sure people stick to the rules. They struggle to understand that this isn't about winding someone up, that's certainly not their intention.

When discussing training, participants highlighted many factors, including suggestions of content and what training should achieve. Participants were keen to highlight officers' instinctive way of working with prisoners who were struggling. The overall suggestion was that officers would usually do the appropriate thing, but lacked either the understanding as to why or the confidence to continue with a chosen approach. This lack of confidence is illustrated by a participant talking about conversations they had with a number of prison officers:

I find it quite interesting working with individuals in the criminal justice system when they tell you their strategies they've put in place. They will often say, I did this and that, but it's probably the wrong thing to do. Often it actually sounds like exactly the right thing to do.

Dependent on their specific experiences, some officers were seen as having greater confidence and knowledge of autism than colleagues within health care. One participant gave the example of a prison, which had a separate wing for prisoners deemed vulnerable due to identified health care needs:

I think depending on who you spoke to and their knowledge of ASD [autism spectrum disorder], but that would be the same for health staff as well. In fact, I would say that the guys up in day care [prison officers working in a specialist wing] were probably slightly better at identifying when people were a bit vulnerable.

All participants had experience of delivering autism training in prisons. This was often linked with training about other conditions, such as learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or a wider approach focusing on neurodiversity. Courses tended to focus on awareness raising, communication and providing specific strategies for officers to work with. This was sometimes split into distinct parts, as described by one participant delivering a national training campaign for prison officers:

We usually split the training into three specific areas, so we have a bit on what is autism, what's a learning disability, how might it impact you generally, ... The second bit is on communication, so we would look at primarily verbal communication, ... The third part then is usually where we draw things together and look at issues specific to the environment.

Another participant described their focus as being split into two distinct parts, covering the morning and afternoon sessions:

We started in the morning, just with an introduction to autism, autism as a condition so that was looking at the theories, then we did some exercises round about stress. Then the afternoon there was a bit about sensory and then there was kind of practical strategies, like formulating structures and how they might look.

Although all participants included autism theory as part of their training, this was often presented as secondary to the more important goal of identifying when someone was struggling. The aim of training was to change prison officers' viewpoints of behaviours and encourage them to question an individual's presentation. This was summarised by one participant using the example of eccentricity:

If somebody is eccentric, ask yourself is it a benign eccentricity or does it actually reflect that they have cognitive, or neurological differences.

Overall a common theme was giving prison officers the skills to constantly reflect and question their approach, pushing them to seek deeper explanations for behaviours. The hope was that through questioning, officers may come to the conclusion that they needed to take action or seek additional support. A lead project worker for a national awareness campaign explained it as follows:

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 reason as to why this person is behaving in this way.

The initial approach of some prisons was to provide targeted, diagnosis specific training for officers working with autistic people in custody. The aim was to give a set of prison officers skills to manage this specific individual, reducing the need for training all prison officers. This approach was hindered by operational issues such as the moving of prisoners across the estate for security reasons. One participant described the frustrations of working with a specific staff team for one autistic individual:

We tried to direct it towards the officers that were most likely to be working with him, which fell down a little bit when again he had to be moved within the prison, because of a fall-out with an officer. ...

This was coupled with the overly-complicated and bureaucratic processes of achieving small reasonable adjustments. It was felt that staff would be less motivated to implement identified strategies, due to the inflexibility of the prison system and the difficulty of achieving change. One participant described the difficulties encountered in trying to get permission for one individual to retain their sunglasses while in prison:

They had a guy who'd come in and he'd spent most of his life wearing sunglasses because of sensitivity to light. They took them off him when he came, because they can't wear sunglasses, you have to see their eyes. This was a major challenge and he wouldn't leave his cell at all. He actually tried to spend all his time under his blanket,

day and night, and was being told that this was not acceptable. The occupational therapist had asked the governor if they could get permission for him to wear sunglasses and was told no, it's not their decision, it's a MoJ [Ministry of Justice] order. They contacted the MoJ and said look we've got this situation and we actually won't be able to do anything with this guy, unless we find some way to address this.

They went on to identify the need for senior management support to achieve change for individuals:

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.

The lack of resources was seen as an issue for the effective support of autistic individuals, in particular the availability of staff and the justification of using resources for autism-specific work. Identifying a source for training was not seen as the main difficulty, but securing enough funding to backfill posts for officers attending training was described as almost impossible:

So I had started to ask about it, there was not any funding. I pursued it with the training managers who were saying that their budget was pretty set, one guy in said he's got a bit of an excess budget but he did not have enough to back fill the prison officers to get released to come to the training.

All participants highlighted the need to justify training through providing evidence of need as a frustrating area of work. One participant highlighted that prison governors were generally supportive of training, if a specific need could be evidenced for their establishment. One participant described the many frustrating conversations they had with governors:

I've spoken to lots of governors who have said that, if you can tell me how many autistic prisoners I have in this prison, then I can put the resources into that. There's nothing more frustrating than hearing that, because you think I can't do that, but there are resources that need to be put in place to help and support.

#### *Qualitative Data from SPS Focus Group*

Central themes emerged during this focus group around organisational issues making the development, delivery and implementation of training difficult. Participants explored how current courses and structures could be used, and alternative ways of delivering information.

One participant reflected on the lack of knowledge about current training across the estate at the SPS College, which acts as the central place for setting training priorities within the SPS. There were suggestions that the position of the SPS College could be undermined by establishments individually bringing in resources, without support from the SPS L&D Managers. One participant described their frustration at the lack of communication across the prison service:

I think it may be interesting for you that we at the college, which is supposed to be the hub of learning and development for the service, don't necessarily know about all of these pockets of activity across the estate.

The need to follow Scottish Government and SPS strategy was highlighted as difficult when setting priorities. Participants emphasised the variety of issues that require attention, asking how to choose the most worthwhile cause. One participant highlighted how the SPS College has little ability to push for change, due to political pressures dictating the direction of travel:

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 ...

There was a strong feeling among all SPS L&D Managers that a more holistic approach would be beneficial, focusing on overarching topics, rather than being pulled into covering individual diagnosis. One participant felt that such an individualised approach would ultimately lead to continuously changing priorities:

Somebody might have a terminal illness, somebody with some form of trauma, somebody who has this, somebody who has a learning disability, they're dyslexic. How do you then devise something that is not just following the flavour of the week? This week maybe it's autism, next week it's someone displaying behaviours associated with dementia, so I think for us it is about how you tailor something that encompasses everything.

Discussion around how to include autism in training dominated the focus group, with participants sharing ideas and thoughts on best ways forward. The general feeling was that including autism across different courses, rather than stand-alone would allow for a more practical approach, offering officers strategies rather than general knowledge about autism. Training could be tailored to the specific needs of individual staff teams and the issues they face on a daily basis. A focus on communication in general was identified as an important area to include autism:

Communications are key to a lot of things and like you're saying, when you do negotiations about how do you deal with X, Y and Z, well communication could be the same with how you speak to a person. That could be convened into how you communicate with someone that has autism. Although communication is the umbrella, you can put autism in it.

Additional weight was given by participants to the need to build on value base, minimum standards of how to treat an autistic individual. This linked closely with the concept of identifying eccentricity or vulnerability found in interviews. Equality and diversity was seen as a good example of weaving a topic across training:

It's like with E&D [equality and diversity]. Just now for new recruits, E&D is in every single course, as it is about treating people with respect, it's about the values and all that kind of thing. For me it is about being able to pepper it throughout everything without necessarily giving it a name.

One area recognised as a possible barrier to training by all participants was the difficulty with training being voluntary. The feeling was that voluntary training is attended only by those keen to learn, who would come in during

their time off to attend. Prisons would likely show some reluctance to back-fill for officers attending training, due to resource issues, meaning that those hard-to-reach officers, who are more entrenched in their view and ways of working, were unlikely to attend:

... established staff, who are set in their ways, who come to work just to get the money and then go home again and have no interest whatsoever. How do we change these people, their mind-set and the way they actually behave themselves?

The focus group participants universally felt the need for alternative approaches to training. The traditional model of classroom, lecture-style training was deemed not suitable, due to the range of issues highlighted above. The strong opinion was that a more holistic approach, using campaigns with a combination of visual resources, e-learning and tailored training courses was most likely to succeed in its aim to reach all staff, while also being more cost effective:

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. Posters or leaflets in the canteen, or whatever, 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, ...

## Discussion

The current exploratory study examined autism-specific training needs for prison officers in the SPS. Aims included establishing autism knowledge among staff at a Scottish prison; what the training needs for prison officers are; and how SPS training managers propose that a training programme might be delivered. It argues that a focus on one singular condition does not support the wider development of officers' ability to work with vulnerable people in prison. A wider approach focusing on neurodiversity is recommended as being the better value for money, while reducing impact on operational resources.

Participants discussed specific vulnerabilities for autistic prisoners in line with previous studies considering lived experience, which have made similar conclusions. This indicates that autistic individuals are at a higher risk of abuse, seclusion and aversive reactions (Allely 2015; Allen *et al.* 2008; Myers 2004; Paterson 2008).

Research has suggested that vulnerabilities are due to a lack of staff knowledge and understanding (Allely 2015; Myers 2004; NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde 2014; Paterson 2008). In contrast, this study found that prison officers showed a good awareness of autism, with many feeling that autistic individuals would be disadvantaged in prison. This difference may be due to an increased awareness of autism among the general population. A survey by the National Autistic Society indicated that 99.5% of the population were aware of autism, but that there was a significant lack of understanding of autism in specific contexts (National Autistic Society 2016). This may be the case for prison officers, who show good awareness

of autism in general, but lack the ability to translate this into a custody setting. Results can be compared with McAdam (2009), in which a good basic awareness of autism was found, but officers did not manage to translate this into an understanding of autism in prison. Similarly, a study by Browning and Caulfield (2011) highlighted that the majority of criminal justice professionals lacked adequate understanding of autism in a criminal justice context.

Results from this study suggest that officers have good general skills in working with vulnerable prisoners. This is supported by comments made in the interviews around staff skill and understanding. Staff were seen as showing good skill but lacking the ability to translate autism knowledge to specific situations. This indicates a very specific training need for staff, to enable them to apply their awareness in practice. Participants had very clear views of what would need to be included in any training programme for officers. Areas such as communication and sensory differences were emphasised, with less importance given to autism theories and underlying cognitive explanations. Many of the areas identified were described as suitable for not only autistic people, but for people with a range of neurodiverse conditions. The focus was firmly on the teaching of practical strategies for prison officers to follow. All participants felt that the primary aim of training should be to increase an officer's skill in recognising prisoners who are struggling, irrespective of diagnosis.

A common barrier to the delivery and implementation of training was the lack of staff and adequate funding for training. This was highlighted by all participants and resonates with current reports around a stretched prison system as a whole (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2018). This is in line with approaches taken within the SPS, which has chosen to focus on Learning Difficulty and Disability (Kirby and Gibbon 2018) and other charities, which have focused on communication needs in general, rather than taking a condition-specific approach (SOLD Network 2019).

Resource difficulties were addressed with ideas of moving away from traditional classroom-based training, towards the use of alternative learning methods. This included using awareness campaigns across the prison estate to highlight different conditions at times when these were in the public eye. This may be supported through the use of more generic e-learning materials and class-based training as required, focusing on a wider neurodiverse population. A similar approach was highlighted by one participant, who discussed the use of staff guides and 'frequently asked questions' information sheets for probation services in England. This may be an alternative to taking a programme of awareness further, in line with the Scottish Government's Autism Strategy (Scottish Government 2018).

This study has shown that limited budgets and prison operational systems require a more creative approach to disseminating autism-specific information. The evidence provided in this study can be used to develop future training programmes for prison officers to increase knowledge across prisons. This model may be replicated for other conditions identified as posing difficulty.

Limitations include the low number of participants in each part of the study, meaning only limited conclusions could be made. The use of a survey was restricted to one prison setting, reducing any conclusions that can be made of staff knowledge across other SPS settings. The use of five-point rating scales could lead staff to overestimate their current autism knowledge and answer in a way that they expect the researcher wants. This limitation has been somewhat reduced through the use of mixed methods and an opportunity to provide more detailed answers in the survey. Finally, the researcher has some experience of working with autistic offenders in Scottish prisons, and this could have influenced coding and interpretation of data, due to a lack of inter-rater reliability measures being completed.

Future research may focus on evaluating awareness campaigns delivered to officers for its effectiveness and impact on referrals for diagnostic services. This could include mapping current autism training delivered in individual establishments and the impact this has had on local staff. There is a need to establish the current prevalence of autism within the prison population, with the most important area for research being the establishment of an effective screening tool that can be applied to forensic populations.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study recognises the need to train officers in autism awareness to improve detection and support for autistic prisoners, while taking account of the significant pressure on resources across the prison system. Focus should be around practical and proactive strategies for the daily management of autistic people in custody, increasing officers' understanding and confidence in working with autistic people in custody. The study also found that focusing on one condition such as autism, may not be the best use of resources. Training should focus on developing prison officers who are able to identify individuals who are struggling and have clear pathways for following up these concerns. A more general approach will reduce focusing on a singular condition over other conditions that may be present. A more general awareness-raising campaign of neurodiversity across the prisoner population could be beneficial, particularly using alternative ways of distributing information. This could include the use of posters, e-learning and short presentations across prisons. More work is required to understand the similarities in difficulties experienced by individuals in custody with different diagnoses. The current prison system should work towards a more inclusive approach to differences in people in custody.

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Date submitted: October 2020

Date accepted: April 2021