



IMPROVING HEALTH AND SUPPORTING JUSTICE

IN May 2009, the Trust embarked on a new project to provide an in-reach learning disability service into Her Majesty's Young Offender Institute (HYMOI) Aylesbury. Over a year on, and the unique partnership is already reaping the rewards.

Words By ALEX JACKSON

Illustration by OLI WINWARD (OLI@MCTREV.COM)

For some of the Ridgeway staff providing support to the judicial system is nothing new, however never before has the Trust embarked on such an intense level of support and analysis within a prison setting.

The team, which consists of Ridgeway psychologists, senior nurses and speech and language therapists, is working alongside the prison's psychologists to determine exactly how many young men on an Indeterminate Sentence for Public Protection (ISPP) have a learning disability.

In Lord Bradley's 2009 review of mental health and learning disability in the criminal justice system, it was found that the identification and assessment of a young offender was a key and challenging issue.

There has been an emphasis on improving the overall well-being of offenders with learning disabilities for some time, by aiding early identification, providing accessible materials and by assisting front-line professionals to develop skills and a knowledge base to help them manage offenders with learning disabilities more effectively.

Ridgeway's contract with HYMOI Aylesbury ties in nicely with this and explores the implications of the latest Department of Health guidance set out in November 2009 entitled 'Improving Health, Supporting Justice in the National Delivery Plan of the Health and Criminal Justice Programme Board'.

The long-term aims of this guidance are primarily focused on training for prison officers and raising awareness among the judiciary of learning disability issues.

Two of the senior nurses involved in the Aylesbury project said the screening process to determine which young men have a learning disability is starting to take shape. Angie Collier, a senior nurse at Evenlode, said: "It took around six months to get the project up and running and for prison officers and offenders to not only get used to us being around on a regular basis, but also understand the purpose of why we are there.

"Often there is little credibility for these young men with a learning disability to come forward and ask for help and we are sensitive to the culture of the environment."

Julie Stringer, also a senior nurse at Evenlode, added: "It took a little while, at first, to get used to the idiosyncrasies of the prison system but the prison staff were very supportive and accommodating to our needs."

The process to determine whether young offenders, between the ages of 18 and 21 years-old have LD starts with a screening process, which is being piloted at Aylesbury.

The nurses use the K-BIT-2 screening tool. The specialist screening features a series of puzzles which can include methods such as word recognition, associating pictures with names and general riddles.

From here, the offender will be seen by a psychologist who will carry out a WAIS-III Test, which is a more accurate IQ test and complex assessment of a person's abilities. It can also include an adaptive behaviour assessment looking at social functioning, to verify the presence of learning disability.

Once a clinical diagnosis has been made, the team seeks to support the individuals in the Young Offenders Institution and on occasion to support transfer into NHS secure services.

Julie said: "We first worked with people with the most complex needs and groups where assessments were most needed. So far, we have met with a quarter of the offenders on an ISPP and in a number of cases have proved the offender has a learning disability.

"Research suggests nationally seven per cent of people in prison may have a learning disability and can be easily lost in the system. It is a case of pre-empting and identifying LD at the earliest stage possible, thereby limiting the chances of them slipping through the loop holes.

"At Aylesbury if we can identify a person with a learning disability two or three months before they move onto adult provision at the age of 21, we can make sure that vital support is in place for them."

The screening will continue for the full three-year contract and possibly beyond, as Angie explains, it is still early days yet.

She said: "The response by the young men has been very positive and we emphasise that the screening service is available to all ISPP's.

"It is still a fairly new way of working which is starting to reap the rewards already and we are delighted to be involved with such a fantastic project giving people with learning disabilities in prison the service and support they deserve."

Head of Psychology at HYMOI Aylesbury, Rachel O'Rourke, said the impact the team has made is enormous.

"We are fortunate at the prison to have access to such a mix of skilled workers and it has been a privilege to have the committed Ridgeway team's timely and wide ranging advice and expertise on board."

"They have hit the ground running and are putting interventions in place and helping young offenders in moving forward through the judicial system. The positive impact they have had on prisons is enormous."

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