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## Supporting prisoners with a range of diverse needs to engage in learning: HMP Stafford

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### Brief description

HMP Stafford provides a highly effective programme of support, focusing on prisoners who are in danger of being excluded from education, training or work because of poor behaviour. The programme also uses effective targeting and support for prisoners who would not traditionally engage with education or training.

### Overview – the provider’s message

‘We recognised that for some prisoners their behaviour and attitude to any structured training was so poor, it frequently meant that they were removed from training or learning sessions. We felt that there was a barrier to them successfully engaging in learning, but we were never sure about how to most effectively deal with these difficult situations when they arose. The prison management, along with our education provider, had a firm commitment to identifying any potential barriers to learning and introducing a programme of support that would support prisoners and help them better engage. It’s a multi-agency approach with all aspects of the prison being involved.’

*Nicholas Gill, Head of Learning and Skills*

### The good practice in detail

It is difficult for offenders to engage in structured learning or training if they have an unidentified barrier to learning, which may exhibit itself as poor behaviour. Many prisoners have gone through their lives with a learning disability that has proved a real barrier. Frequently, with no strategy to deal with this disability, they become frustrated and lose confidence. Many have struggled with the embarrassment of very poor literacy levels. Most are unemployed at the time of their sentence and if they fail to engage with learning, their prospects of gaining secure employment will not improve when they leave prison. Many are then tempted to return to a life of crime.

By providing prisoners with detailed assessments of their wider needs and putting in place a programme of support that helps them find ways to engage with learning and to progress, they quickly develop their confidence and self-esteem. The support programme at HMP Stafford is the key to giving them the best chance of gaining employment or taking their learning further upon release.

So how does HMP Stafford help prisoners improve their confidence and self-esteem, and to engage with learning that brings real benefits in helping them recognise their life chances? David Roberts, Offender Learning and Skills Service manager, explains: 'Developing a more specialist approach to the assessment of prisoners' wider needs began in response to recognising that in lots of cases, we were not meeting the needs of different prisoners. It was clear that for some prisoners, we needed more specialist help in correctly identifying what the barriers were to learning and how we could effectively address these. Our staff were keen to work with specialist advisers who were skilled at developing strategies, to create a programme of support that would work across the prison, offering plans that could be sufficiently flexible to meet individual, wide-ranging needs.'

‘Together we explore what they could do and how this might be achieved.’

Prisoners are referred for specialist assessment from across the prison. This could be as a result of an initial information, advice and guidance interview at induction, or it could be later when a tutor or instructional officer feels that there is an underlying cause of unacceptable behaviour. Alternatively, potential barriers to learning are identified by prison staff who work on the wings, or by the learning and skills outreach worker. Prisoners who fail to engage with activities or are frequently removed to segregated areas are routinely assessed to identify if any specific reason for this can be found. Vicky Davies, outreach tutor, says: 'Some prisoners may have a mental health problem. Frequently they are anti-education. Prisoners in the segregation unit can be angry and frustrated. They don't see themselves as the sort of people who would go to education or training. Part of my role is to gain their trust. I develop a rapport with them and together we explore what they could do and how this might be achieved.'

By developing a specialist programme of support for prisoners, the prison is now better placed to meet a wide range of diverse needs and disabilities. A more detailed assessment means a more individualised approach to learning can be developed. Teaching strategies are now informed by a clear understanding of individual needs. Specific courses have been developed for hard-to-engage prisoners to access learning sessions that are designed to develop the necessary personal skills to help them progress into further learning. For many prisoners who are not familiar with traditional learning sessions, they need to develop the personal skills to work in groups. This can be daunting for someone who feels they have been a failure within the educational system. Sarah Leigh, assessor and learning adviser, says: 'My role is to help develop assessments that have the potential to identify hidden disabilities that prisoners are sometimes not aware they have. I help tutors, instruction officers and, on occasion, wing staff in supporting prisoners with a specific disability. Staff are trained to identify the characteristic of a disability and understand the part they play in helping prisoners overcome this barrier.'

## The benefits of a support programme

Lindsey Harris, learning difficulties and disabilities department lead, says: 'Prior to developing the programme of support, prisoners who lacked confidence and had specific barriers to learning would struggle with the course. Frequently these prisoners were frustrated and became problematic, with poor behaviour. Tutors did their best, but without specialist understanding, progress for the whole group was slow. Often

‘Less staff time is now spent dealing with problematic prisoners whose behaviour disrupts learning.’

prisoners were removed when their behaviour could not be modified. Now staff are more confident in supporting prisoners, and improvements to assessment have ensured that prisoners are on the right course and progressing at the right pace. Less staff time is spent dealing with problematic prisoners whose behaviour disrupts learning.'

Chris Banks, student support worker, adds: 'I work with prisoners on an individual basis. I gain their trust and find out what they see as the barriers they have in accessing learning. Working with tutors and prisoners to find the best way to develop strategies for learning allows prisoners to progress at their own pace. They know that I will work with them until they feel more confident about their ability to learn.'

## Other benefits to the prison

Nicholas Gill, head of learning and skills, says: 'Since the more focused approach to supporting prisoners, the incidents of self harm and harm to others have reduced. Sometimes the frustration that prisoners feel when their specific needs are not being met can cause aggressive behaviour. I can think of lots of cases where the support programme has completely changed a difficult, problematic prisoner into someone who enjoys engaging with activities and is eager to learn.'

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David Roberts adds: 'We have particularly good links with healthcare, where a joint approach is taken to supporting prisoners with mental health problems. Our links with the segregation unit have been effective at helping prisoners modify their behaviour and reintegrate within prison activities'. Better links are in place with the psychology staff who deliver the offending behaviour programmes; often they will request information on the way individuals learn and the strategies used.

## Prisoners' views on the programme

A prisoner on the 'getting started' programme comments: 'I was apprehensive about going to an education class. My previous experience of education was very fragmented, and I was frequently excluded at school. I always felt that there was something different about me and it was difficult for me to learn. I was often disruptive in class. When I started this course, I was made to feel welcome. The tutor was really friendly and supportive, taking time to understand what barriers I had in order to make my learning individual to me – the people on my course all had different ways of learning. It made me realise that I was not that different and that other people have problems learning; I am much more confident now and I'm keen to go to college when I am released.'

'I am excited about being able to read to my son.'

Another prisoner adds: 'I never learnt to read and write; I didn't really go to school at all. When I started this course, I received lots of individual support and encouragement from my tutor to make my learning individual. The tutor is good at picking up when I am finding something difficult and we work together to find a way round it. I am much more confident now and my self-esteem has improved. This has been a second opportunity for me – I'm sure it will help improve my life and help me to get a job when I am released.'

## Ensuring the programme is working

David Roberts says: 'Measuring success in this type of work is difficult. One of the factors we look at is retention on course, which has improved. More prisoners now complete their course and success rates have improved. Feedback from prisoners is good and staff now

work in a more relaxed atmosphere. Progression from our entry programmes has improved. Staff morale is high and they can really see the benefits of being supported to develop a range of teaching strategies to meet specific needs. The number of prisoners that are removed from classes because of poor behaviour has reduced. Prisoners are developing good personal skills, such as being able to work in groups, taking part in discussions, and listening to instructions.'

## Key factors that make this approach successful

David Roberts says: 'Partnership working is a key factor in our success. The understanding between different departments within the prison is important; strategies we use to deal with very specific needs of some of the most difficult prisoners are shared across the prison. For the programme to have the most impact, we turned our attention to prisoners who were not necessarily engaged with education. We needed to have a shared approach to their support. Raising awareness across the prison of what the support programme did, how it worked and who it was targeted at, was a key factor in its success. Prison staff needed to have an understanding of which prisoners may benefit and how they could be referred.'

## Overcoming problems with setting up the programme

Lindsey Harris says: 'Initially, staff were reluctant to run classes where the number of participants would be small. The nature of the work we do and the need to develop strategies for prisoners who were disruptive, or who would not normally engage with education or training, is labour intensive. It was important to be clear about what the benefits would be, particularly that less time would be spent dealing with disruptive prisoners. It was also important to educate people to a whole-prison approach.'

‘The benefits would not just be in learning and skills, but across the prison, developing a more harmonious, socially inclusive environment.’

## Provider background

HMP Stafford is a Category C adult male training prison serving mainly the West Midlands. The prison is an old-style Victorian prison consisting of seven wings. Approximately 45% of the prison population are classed as vulnerable prisoners. 25% of prisoners are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Foreign nation prisoners make up 10% of the population of which 48 require support for English for speakers of other languages. The average length of stay for prisoners is around nine months. The operational capacity of HMP Stafford is 741. [The Manchester College](#) provides the formal education provision and vocational training through the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS).

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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