

ST GILES TRUST | SUPPORTING EX-OFFENDERS WITH 'HIDDEN DISABILITIES'

Case study of a Clinks member

August 2016



People in contact with the Criminal Justice System are more likely than the general population to have a disability - whether physical disabilities, learning disabilities and difficulties, or conditions such as personality disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The Bromley Briefing Prison Factfile in Autumn 2015 found that 36% of prisoners are estimated to have a physical or mental disability, compared with 19% of the general population; and that dyslexia is three to four times more common amongst prisoners than the general population¹. Many people with disabilities have support needs which, if left unmet, put them at a significant disadvantage when trying to navigate the Criminal Justice System. As a result they often experience poorer outcomes than other people in contact with the Criminal Justice System.



Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), for example, is a lifelong condition which affects how a person communicates and makes sense of the world around them. There are wide range of traits which can be associated with ASD. Several aspects of life in prison such as artificially lit wings, noise from prisoners and staff, and sudden changes to routine through lock-downs

can all increase someone's stress and the problematic behaviour which results from it. In addition, the stark contrast between the institutionalised environment of custody and the world outside when released can worsen a person with ASD's condition and make it difficult for them to cope. Given that the condition shapes every aspect of an individual's life, flexible and highly-tailored support is needed if they are to successfully desist from crime and rebuild their lives.

About St Giles Trust

St Giles Trust is a charity helping ex-offenders and disadvantaged people to move their lives forward. They support 18,000 people each year through their work in prisons and in the community. Their support is tailored and flexible with the aim of helping people overcome barriers which might be keeping them trapped in negative lifestyles. Typically, St Giles Trust's clients are given support around access to housing, finding employment and training, as well as emotional support to keep them motivated and on track. Service user involvement underpins all St Giles Trust's work. For example, their Peer Advisor Programme enables some clients to train to become professional caseworkers.

¹ Prison Reform Trust (2015) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile Autumn 2015*, Online: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Factfile%20Autumn%202015.pdf>

St Giles Trust supports people whilst they are serving their sentence in prison, and ex-offenders who have previously served a sentence. Clients are sometimes referred to their services from other providers - both in prison and in the community - including probation, other charities, and social services and the police. Clients can also self-refer.

Support for offenders with disabilities

St Giles Trust come into contact with many offenders and ex-offenders with physical and other disabilities, including some who go on to become St Giles Trust employees. As a result, the staff team have increased their skills and awareness around disabilities, and improved their services to better cater for any needs presented by their clients and employees as a result of their disabilities.

One way they have done this is to develop a Diversity Group, led by the Peer Advisor Programme Co-ordinator, which drives awareness and adoption of inclusive strategies to support people with learning disabilities and mental health issues across the charity. This small group of staff specialise in 'hidden' disabilities across the organisation, delivering



workshops to staff, providing screening assessments to staff, clients and volunteers, as well as providing specialist support and resources to clients with disabilities. The organisation has also made improvements to their offices to cater for people with physical disabilities, for example by providing ramps and lift access for people in wheelchairs, and disabled toilet facilities.

Autism Spectrum Disorder project

St Giles Trust's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) project provided support to prison leavers from HMP Holloway with autistic and personality disorder traits from 2014-2016. It was delivered in partnership with The Cambian Group who offered specialist healthcare to people affected by such issues. The small team comprised of a prisons manager, an experienced case worker and a psychologist. The ultimate goal was to help reduce the likelihood of the women re-entering the Criminal Justice System, and support them to be independent. The ASD project was developed as a result of recommendations from an earlier evaluation into their through-the-gate project, WIRE, which supports vulnerable female prison leavers returning to London. The recommendations – and the anecdotal experience of staff working on the project – highlighted the significant number of very vulnerable women who had mental health needs linked to ASD traits and personality disorder. The report recommended a refocusing of WIRE to solely support women with exceptionally high levels of need.

Although funding for the ASD element of the project has now ended, the existing WIRE service and its staff continue to offer support to women affected by autism.

“We treat each client as an individual because autism affects people in different ways. We'll work with what restricts them day to day and that can be pretty much anything. Alongside basic needs such as housing and benefits, my work is more personalised, for example, accompanying a client on public transport to increase their confidence using it.” – Project case worker

The highly intensive nature of the support needed by the clients, and the fact that the team were small, meant they could only take on a limited caseload. In the first year of the project, six women were supported by the team, and this year they reached their target of eight.

Women were referred to the project by anyone working within HMP Holloway – from frontline prison officers to mental health teams. An initial assessment established the level of the

condition and any other needs. As well as providing support in prison, the project also provided ‘through the gate’ and community-based support. In addition, the WIRE project found people with ASD face a number of other barriers when navigating the Criminal Justice System, including

- diagnosis can take more than a year so people can be delayed in receiving the support they need
- although awareness of women with ASD has increased, there is still a lack of knowledge among the general public and professionals
- ASD is often seen as a male disorder and the condition is more frequently hidden in women.

To respond to these barriers, all the WIRE project staff have completed training on recognising and supporting women with ASD. Caseworkers offer support and services if someone is presenting with ASD traits, even if they have not yet received a formal diagnosis. The team continues to raise awareness within criminal justice circles that ASD is not only a male disorder.

Spreading the word

Through the ASD project, St Giles Trust trained and supported other staff working with their clients, including frontline professionals in prisons, probation, specialist agencies and the NHS. Women with the condition can often make frequent and inappropriate use of services and exhibit challenging behaviour when they do. To ensure the client is well supported it is important for other professionals working with them to be aware of their condition and know how to deal with it. One of the team’s key activities was collecting tools and resources to support their clients and disseminating these to the people who work with them.

“The project aims to avoid women going down the emergency services route.

Across the sector, there is limited awareness of issues around ASD and the fact that many women in the Criminal Justice System may be experiencing them. Women in prison who are seen as disruptive and ‘kicking off’ may have the condition underlying their behaviour.” – Prisons manager

As ASD is so often a hidden condition, St Giles Trust has developed a guide for both women and professionals to help them identify traits of ASD and guide them through the process of accessing support and, if wanted, a diagnosis. [Download the guide here.](#)

Case study of a St Giles Trust client

There were concerns around Alice's mental health when she was re-arrested. When the Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis came though Alice was relieved and said "I always suspected I was different, now I know I am."

The St Giles Trust case worker had weekly meetings with Alice. At first, Alice was so nervous about leaving the house the case worker had to meet her at her home and escort her to and from her probation appointments. Alice gained confidence and she is now able to make her way to and from meetings on her own.

Alice is keen to work and has been supported to apply for jobs and advised on how to disclose her conviction. As her levels of confidence grew, she enrolled on a proofreading course and is able to study this at home. Alice is continuing to work with the probation service through their Education, Training and Employment advisor and is currently compiling her CV.

The case worker is helping her with budgeting and the other tasks and responsibilities of independent living. This has involved helping Alice with her financial situation which was causing her a lot of anxiety.

Alice is currently residing with her mother. The next big step is to support Alice to live independently for the first time. She has started to read about her condition and this has helped her understand it. She has been supported to share this with her mother so she can also gain an insight into Alice's condition.

Alice's risk of re-offending has reduced and her mental health has improved. St Giles Trust continue to work with her and she is now being supported to access psychological therapy. St Giles Trust will support Alice to find employment, and continue to provide support around how to disclose her conviction to a potential employer.

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