



LANCASHIRE
VIOLENCE REDUCTION
NETWORK

LVRN – VIOLENCE REDUCTION INTERVENTION: HMP WYMOTT SENSORY ROOM EVALUATION

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Introduction

Located in Central Lancashire, HMP Wymott opened its doors in 1979 as a Category C prison for adult male prisoners. Wymott holds over 1,200 prisoners, across 11 units, with approximately half of those held on a vulnerable wing (6 units), generally for sexual offences (Wymott Prison, 2024). The prison provides access to sports, education and work opportunities to enable prisoners to develop a variety of skills, as well as collaborating with Age Concern to support older prisoners. Working in partnership with Wymott and their regional prison group, the Lancashire Violence Reduction Network (LVRN) is developing a trauma-informed strategy to support children in Lancashire who have a parent in prison.

This report evaluates one part of a larger project (the Dragon's Den) in partnership with LVRN, which introduced various initiatives centred around violence reduction. This part of the project looks at the implementation of a sensory room, which is situated within the education facility at Wymott. The Neurodiversity Support Manager (NSM) allows access to the sensory room to prisoners who are neurodivergent and/or have additional learning or sensory requirements. The sensory room contains a variety of support tools and offers a secure, quiet place to be away from the prison environment. A safety officer is always present, and prisoners are permitted to bring a buddy or mentor to their sessions.

Evidence demonstrates that the most significant predictor for desistance from reoffending is to engage in pro-social networks that serve to develop positive identities and support engagement in meaningful activities. Removing barriers and stigmatising attitudes can enable individuals to build personal and social recovery and prevent relapse (Musgrove and Best, 2019). To have an impact on desistance from crime, a

focus on building and strengthening resources available to prisoners is key (Mann et al, 2018)

The room's purpose and basic terms of use are outlined in an agreement that prisoners sign after being informed about the resources and support available to them. In order to encourage reflective behaviour and allow for the measurement of impact, prisoners are encouraged to submit comments on their time spent in the room. Prisoners have discretion over how they use the room during sessions. They are however, encouraged to experiment with various tools and methods to find the ones that work best for them. This may consist of using the weighted blanket, doing crafts such as colouring and painting, using the fidget toys, watching TV, listening to music, playing X-Box, or just having a private area for quiet contemplation or conversation. Light music, a weighted blanket, and a calm atmosphere all aid decompression, grounding, and relaxation, which are all beneficial for people with autism or ADHD to thrive (Udonsi, 2023). Staff members are urged to use the referral mechanism that is in place to assist men who could be experiencing a crisis, whether they are subject to a CSIP (challenge support and intervention plan), or an ACCT (assessment care in custody and teamwork), or having difficulty adjusting to prison life.

This report will explore and evaluate prisoner and prison staff experience and feedback of the sensory room at Wymott, and ends with some recommendations for future developments or use of the room.

Literature Review

Recently published statistics showed assault incidents are increasing in prison. In 2010, there were 14,356 assault incidents (169 incidents per 1,000 prisoners). By June 2022, the annual number of incidents had grown to 20,551 (260 incidents per 1,000 prisoners). The number of gang affiliated individuals, both in custody and in the

community has also risen in the last decade, despite the recommendations put forward in Catch22's 2014 study about how to reduce gang violence (Catch-22, 2024).

Catch22 published research from their specialist research unit, The Dawes Research Unit, a decade ago. According to the 2014 study on the nature of prison gangs (Catch-22, 2014), gang members were disproportionately responsible for violent crimes. In order to reduce violence in prison, the study concluded that that safely and sensitively managing gangs, supporting gang-affiliated individuals, and encouraging gang exit whilst in custody are essential steps to reducing prison violence. Violence reduction within prison is known to promote improved engagement and rehabilitation as well as staff retention, but there is a need for more evidence about the efficacy of initiatives (Day et al, 2022).

Through the provision of education, skills, and addiction care, modern jails will reduce recidivism and safeguard the public by enabling prisoners to lead law-abiding productive lives. The prison strategy white paper released in 2021 (Gov.UK, 2021) lays out a new blueprint implementing the largest prison construction programme in over a century. The aim of this white paper is to reduce crime and maintain public safety.

Important actions consisted of:

- A zero tolerance to drugs
- Adequate support for offenders' rehabilitation from substance misuse
- Access to adequate education in numeracy and literacy
- Introduction of job matching to support offenders with work opportunities and develop skills
- Resettlement passports

- Fast track punishments

New Initiatives at Wymott

There have been challenges to implementing new initiatives in prisons. Typically, prisons manage and schedule their own programmes and events, and staff members who have received specialised training conduct and assist these. There are several factors to consider when an outside supplier wants to conduct or deliver courses. Issues related to operations or security may occur daily. Employees might be reassigned, for instance, to fill in for absentees after an emergency or incident. Additionally, for security concerns, there may be last-minute lockdowns or covert operations, which would prevent planned efforts from proceeding.

At Wymott, a single person was assigned to promote the initiatives financed by VRN in addition to their regular responsibilities. There have been challenges related to implementation and evaluation efforts. Occasionally, certain people or departments have found new initiatives to be untenable due to ongoing staffing shortages.

Methodology

An inductive qualitative research strategy (Bruan and Clarke, 2021) was adopted for this research project, to capture a deeper insight through engagement directly with the individuals who have accessed the sensory room. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed and agreed between LVRN and Lancaster University using prior knowledge and experience. The aim of the data gathered was to understand what is known about the intervention, how often it has been used, what the benefits are and what concluding feedback and proposed recommendations could be drawn. The interviews were planned in advance to enable staff at the prison to be available and to ensure the safe movement of the participant to the researcher on the day.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was allowed access to the prison on 3 separate occasions with a fully trained prison officer and escorted to the interviewing room. Participant Information sheets together with a signed consent form was presented to each participant prior to the interview. All ethical considerations were approved by Lancaster University, LVRN and the Prison and were adhered to prior to commencing any research, and anonymised data was shared.

The researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the study and addressed the questions to the participants professionally, limiting any 'off topic' diversions which was the case with several prisoners wanting to discuss their personal circumstances or offences in greater detail than was necessary.

Sampling

Purposeful representative sampling from wing officers (S1-4) and prisoners (P1-8) who had accessed the intervention (n=12) was used for this project. Recruitment was successfully achieved between the researcher, prison staff and selected prisoners via a process of safeguarding procedures and suitability for the study.

Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data using the software package NVIVO was the most appropriate approach for this type of study. This involved a process of transcription onto word document, cleaning the datasets, uploading the datasets into NVIVO, and using Braun and Clarke's (2021), thematic analysis steps of coding and theming, using an interpretivist approach.

Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with prisoners (n=8) and prison staff (n=4).

90% of prisoners interviewed were imprisoned for their first offence and selected from both vulnerable wings and main wings of the prison. Sentences varied between 18 months to 13 years. All participants interviewed disclosed being either diagnosed with a mental health or developmental condition including anxiety, depression, ADHD, Autism and PTSD.

Three key themes were identified upon completion of the analysis:

- Benefits of the Intervention
- Challenges with Accessing the Sensory Room
- The need to Improve the Room Facilities

Benefits of the Intervention

The majority of participants agreed that the sensory room has a positive impact due to the calm and relaxing environment, with majority referring to the contents and layout of the room and having a space different from an 'ordinary' meeting room or their cell:

"It helps you understand your difficulties, help you progress and allows you to talk and be yourself. It's a good incentive being able to listen to music and stops you feeling frustrated" (P1)

"Good choice and lots of variety such as music, games, bean bags and a weighted blanket. I can open up more in a relaxing environment. Yes I think it's helped me because I know I've got somewhere else to go and just get out my cell for a bit, and yeah I will be using it again" (P2)

"I really liked the bean bags and the music. It helps you just relax and then you can think better and it's a room you can just get away from it all" (P6)

One prisoner who supported another fellow prisoner as a buddy (peer-led support available to prisoners) explained the prisoner was really struggling with anxiety and

coming out from his cell, even hiding under the bed, which has since improved while on monthly visits to the sensory room:

“he’s had 3 or 4 visits so far and is now only getting under his bed when triggered so the use of the room is certainly having a positive impact on him” (P3)

Despite the positive responses from the participants, none mentioned whether this had an impact on violence reduction. Staff that were interviewed had differing views depending on their roles, although the majority expressed a positive impact on prisoners, explaining how the room provides a different atmosphere other than the regular rooms prisoners usually have access to:

“It gives them somewhere other than their cell to relax, they can talk more openly” (S2)

“Yes, it’s a nicer space than what they’re used to, a place they can just chill out and do what they want, listen to music and relax a bit. I had a good chat with him just chilling on the bean bag. It definitely helps them because they feel more calmer in there” (S1)

Challenges with Accessing the Sensory Room

Whilst observing during visits, as with all prisons, regime difficulties and staffing shortages were a common theme. Prison officers were frequently re-deployed onto another wing and often other roles to assist on short-staffed wings. The result of this is inevitably that prisoners are not always able to access the sensory room at their planned appointment times:

“I’ve only been able to use the room once because the other session got cancelled, there wasn’t any staff to bring me across” (P4)

“I’ve used it before but that was just for a meeting, I’m still waiting for them to give me a time. There was one booked, but no one came” (P7)

“The main issue is we just can’t always get them there. If there’s not enough of us on, we just can’t do it. And sometimes its being used for meetings. We have a diary for it and book them in, but like I said something happens and we can’t get them across” (S3)

Another issue identified was some staff were not fully informed about the sensory room, or they had heard about it but were not sure of the referral process. The morale seemed low due to the short-staffing issue and the view of the sensory room gained some negative responses:

"We just don't have the staff or the time to take them. Half the staff on here aren't even from this wing" (S1)

"I don't really know much about it. I've heard bits about it but I haven't taken anyone there and to be honest I'm not sure if it is going to be of any use because we get these things all the time. They come and go and aren't as good as what you think and it's the same problem - never enough staff - so they don't get to use it anyway" (S4)

The Need to Improve the Room's Facilities

A number of improvement suggestions were made by the participants from both prisoners and staff. Whilst prisoners responded positively to their experience of the sensory room, they did offer recommendations, some from prior knowledge of using sensory facilities in community settings and others simply offering enhancement ideas:

"I think there needs to be more texture on the walls, more objects to 'fiddle' with like they have in the community ones" (P8)

"I like it but it's not what I thought it was going to be. I mean I like it; I like just sitting in there, but I think there needs to be more things to see. Maybe something else on the walls or the ceiling when you're led on the beanbags, it's a bit plain" (P4)

A key issue identified with the sensory room was the room not being utilised fully for the intended purpose. Many participants referred to the room being used as a storage facility or used for meetings. This seemed to detract from the intended purpose of the room and take away the relaxing atmosphere:

*"I've only ever used the room for a meeting, but thought it was only for people with Autism. I didn't know much about it until *X* told me but I would use it again, but I think they need to get rid of the extra stuff in there because it looks like a bit of a dumping ground for other stuff like chairs and stuff" (P8)*

The perceptions gleaned from staff agreed with some of the points raised by prisoners, particularly regarding adequate access due to staffing, or the room being used more as a meeting room and not the intended purpose. Additionally, some staff were unsure of the intended use of the room, that the intervention was particularly for the use of younger prisoners and to be used as violence reduction, rather, they thought it was aimed more at those prisoners with diagnosed conditions such as Autism:

“Like I said, I don’t know much about it, I thought it was just for the one’s that were neurodiverse. I think it would be good for the other wings to use it as a place to calm down when they’re kicking off, but it’s the staffing, it’s not always easy to get them there when we’re always short staffed” (S3)

Recommendations

From the themes presented above, and from anecdotal discussions during field visits, we established the following recommendations for future use of the sensory room:

- There is potential for the sensory room to be used as a third space for de-escalation, self-care, restorative/trauma-informed practices, and therefore violence reduction, as found in forensic mental health research (e.g. Fish, 2018). This is important when considering reasonable adjustments for people with sensory issues/neurodivergence and/or mental health conditions (Robinson & Forrester, 2023).
- There is a need for greater awareness and wider advertising of the sensory room, using additional posters, staff communication or perhaps using a peer system with prisoners that have already accessed the room, such as ‘Buddies’. This could improve the knowledge of and use of the sensory room. In addition, this information needs to reach the prisoners from other wings who are not necessarily neurodiverse but would benefit from a safe place to calm down or talk to a staff member away from their wing and cell.

- It is important to use the room only for the original intended purpose. This would mean making sure that all items of furniture that were being used for meetings or as storage are removed, as they impact the experience for the people that the room is intended to benefit.
- Further insights into staff understanding of the sensory room need to be gleaned, along with further collection of adequate data over time. The intervention is relatively new and few have accessed it, with those only having accessed it once or twice. It is therefore difficult to determine any clear understanding or measurement of whether the sensory room is fit for purpose and working to reduce violence at this point. The researcher would recommend a further collection of data for analysis once the sensory room is more established and more prisoners are utilising the intervention.

Limitations

Although this evaluation is based on a smaller dataset than expected, many important points were made by interviewees. A further potential limitation is that participants were selected by a staff member at the prison on suitability and availability, therefore, some response bias could be assumed.

Additionally, the researcher could only secure three visits to the prison to carry out the interviews and relied heavily on these dates and times being co-ordinated.

Conclusion

It is clear from the participant responses that interventions such as the sensory room at Wymott have the potential to reduce violence by providing a space for de-stress and de-escalation. This is increasingly recognised as important when considering reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent prisoners and those with mental health conditions, as a way to reduce sensory overload. Prisoners who have had access to

the room described many benefits to their mental wellbeing and stability, however it is important that staff are made aware of the purpose and importance of these interventions, and that staffing levels are kept sufficient so that these interventions can be accessed by those who need them.

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