



Project report

Adapting delivery of the Thinking Skills Programme to include prisoners with learning disabilities

By the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

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Project team

Alison Giraud-Saunders
Nzinga Akinshegun
Prof Glynis Murphy
Dr Peter Oakes

Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

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Background

It has been shown across a number of studies and reports (Loucks, 2007; Mottram, 2007; Talbot and Riley, 2007) that there are significant numbers of people with learning disabilities in the prison population. These are often vulnerable people with global difficulties in learning, adapting to the environment and communicating with other people. For this group, prison can be a bewildering experience where it is very difficult to understand what is happening day-to-day. Offenders with learning disabilities in custodial settings are more likely than others to be subject to control and restraint procedures and segregation (Talbot, 2008). Without support and reasonable adjustments, people with learning disabilities are unlikely to adapt to being in prison and to begin the work needed to avoid re-offending and the associated consequences.

A range of programmes is available to most offenders to help them understand and change the behaviours that led them to offend. Whilst there is now provision for sex offenders with learning disabilities, a cognitive skills programme was not available for this group and the Thinking Skills Programme (TSP) had not been adapted. TSP is suitable for all types of offender with a medium to high risk of re-offending. The programme's ultimate goal is to reduce re-offending and a suitability assessment for this programme is frequently included as part of an individual's formal sentence management. Indeed it was exclusion from this provision that led to a successful legal challenge for discrimination by an offender with learning disabilities in custody against the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (part of the Mental Health Foundation) was awarded a grant by the Department of Health (DH) to adapt delivery of TSP for offenders with learning disabilities.

Project summary

The aim of the project, as agreed after discussion with DH and NOMS, was to test the feasibility of adapting delivery of the existing Thinking Skills Programme for offenders with learning disabilities. As a result the Foundation, in association with NOMS, adapted the manuals and produced a range of accessible materials to accompany the programme. The adapted programme was piloted in three prisons and delivery of the programme was evaluated from a number of different perspectives, including the facilitators, participants and prison management to highlight any organisational issues that might promote or obstruct implementation of adapted delivery in custody.

It had been the intention to test the delivery within the community; however, the assessment tools for offenders with lower IQ are less established in this setting. This is something that NOMS is currently working to address.

It became clear that the initial plan to pilot in both community and prison settings would not be feasible in the time remaining; a small extension of the timetable (within the original grant sum) was agreed with DH to complete three pilots in prison and then complete the evaluation and final amendments.

Project delivery

Getting going

The Department of Health awarded the grant to start the project in April 2010. The Foundation had contacted NOMS before applying for the grant and sought contact again as soon as the grant was confirmed. (NOMS owns the intellectual property of the Thinking Skills Programme).

The initial project team consisted of Alison Giraud-Saunders (project manager) and two highly experienced clinical psychologists: Prof Glynis Murphy (University of Kent) and Dr Peter Oakes (University of Hull). Two stakeholder groups were established to oversee the project. The first of these was a governance group comprising representatives from NOMS, DH and the Foundation. The second was an advisory group comprising leading consultants and clinicians with experience in forensic services for people with learning disabilities and the prison system. In addition to this, links were established with three groups of people with learning disabilities who had experience of the criminal justice system.

Early discussions with colleagues in DH Offender Health and NOMS Rehabilitation Services Group (now Interventions Services) demonstrated that the proposal as originally conceived needed significant adaptation in order to be acceptable to NOMS. A great deal of the first year of the project was spent on discussions through the project governance group to reach a point at which NOMS would be prepared to allow access to the materials and to agree that the style and methods of delivery could be adapted to suit offenders with learning disabilities. This was vital to protect the integrity of the TSP programme and to ensure that any adaptations were in keeping with the model of change and key principles of TSP. A legal agreement between DH and the Ministry of Justice was required to license use of the programme materials for the purpose of the project. Until this was in place we could not recruit the project worker or commence serious work on adaptation of the programme.

Developing the adaptations

As soon as the legal agreement was confirmed, in autumn 2011, we proceeded to recruitment (involving NOMS) and were able to appoint Nzinga Akinshegun as project worker, who had experience and qualifications of working with a forensic population. She took up post mid-November; NOMS were very helpful in securing places for her on both of the five day training courses (core skills and programme specific) that must be passed before delivery of an accredited intervention. She completed these successfully by mid-December and as a result was able to fulfil the role of project worker. She also had to go through the full security clearance procedure to be allowed to work in prisons.

The project worker made a start on evaluating the programme delivery and materials as soon as she took up post. Arrangements were made to test ideas with people with learning disabilities and to check drafts with NOMS, who needed to ensure that the integrity of the programme was being maintained. Theoretically, people with learning disabilities experience a variety of cognitive difficulties in verbal comprehension, memory, information processing and executive functioning. While different people experience such difficulties to somewhat different degrees, people with pervasive learning disabilities can be expected to have deficits in all these areas. In addition they are likely to experience difficulties with practical skills, such as literacy, numeracy and everyday living skills. The adaptation took account of the cognitive difficulties likely to be experienced by

participants. Adaptation also had to take account of the constraints imposed by working within a prison regime (for example, the length of each session and the overall length of the programme). Close liaison was required with NOMS to understand these requirements and to understand the full range of materials that required adaptation.

Our main adaptations focused on the programme manual and its associated materials, developing a range of accessible materials for facilitators to use in group work. For example, actors with learning disabilities recorded scripts devised for fictional characters to illustrate some of the learning points.

Offender assessment and selection

All potential participants in the pilots met the programme's standard risk and need criteria. In order to identify people with the targeted IQ of 60 to 80, we had initially hoped to work with prisons that were already using the Learning Disability Screening Questionnaire, following the DH-led pilot of this tool. However, this would not have identified people with IQ below 80 reliably (the threshold for TSP) and we agreed with NOMS on use of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) or the Wechsler Abbreviated Intelligence Scale (WASI) as alternatives for assessing potential participants (particularly since most potential participants would already have had one of these assessments).

Piloting

In order to select an appropriate pilot site, the Interventions Unit¹ of NOMS (IU) invited expressions of interest to be involved with the pilot. Within their expression of interest sites had to demonstrate how they met a number of criteria. These included positive quality assurance scores, experienced staff in the delivery of TSP and also delivery of the adapted SOTP programme within the establishment, as this would mean that the use of the WAIS and WASI would already be established and the SOTP team could offer support to the TSP delivery team in working with offenders with a low IQ.

Upon receipt of the expressions of interest, IU (together with the relevant commissioners) reviewed the interest and selected the initial pilot site (HMP Whatton). It was agreed that the facilitator team would comprise existing TSP facilitators from HMP Whatton and one member of the Cognitive and Motivational Programmes Team from within Interventions Services, NOMS. Prior to starting the pilot, the facilitators were provided with training by the project worker and the SOTP team at HMP Whatton. This focused on the adaptations to the programme and how best to deliver a programme to offenders with a lower IQ. Piloting started in June 2012. The project worker observed the delivery of the programme and carried out a range of evaluation tasks using an evaluation manual designed for the project and based on a model of realistic evaluation. The evaluation included psychometric outcome measures (recommended by a member of the advisory group) and a variety of focus groups and interviews, with both participants and staff. The first pilot was deemed to be positive overall. However, it also highlighted a number of key areas of development, such as the need to ensure sites are fully aware of the management issues (e.g. how many catch up sessions are permissible) and also that the programme length would benefit from being increased.

Following the initial pilot we revised the manuals and other materials, based on the feedback received from facilitators, participants and prison staff. For example, we developed management guidance that was used in conjunction with the current TSP Management Manual and covered issues such as consent forms and end-of-programme

¹ Now Interventions Services

reports. We also contributed towards the development of the Theory Manual and developed further the training package that we delivered to the staff involved with the delivery of the second and third prisons for the further pilots. IU (NOMS), with the commissioners, selected the two further pilot sites from the original expressions of interest and these ran concurrently in early 2013 (HMP Wakefield and HMP Wymott). Our project worker co-facilitated the group at HMP Wymott, gaining additional insights into the programme delivery from the facilitator's perspective.

We presented early findings (approach to adaptation, early learning from the three pilots) at the International Conference "Care and Treatment of Offenders with a Learning Disability" in Newcastle upon Tyne on 4 April 2013; the session was well attended and participants were interested in the findings.

Evaluation of feasibility

The evaluation was designed specifically for this project using a conceptual framework known as realistic evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This approach has been used widely in programme evaluation where it is important to apply the findings of evaluation in different settings. This is especially important where feasibility is the central question and there is a possibility of "rolling out" a programme on a wider basis. The evaluation examined three central elements: the *context* for the pilot, the *mechanism* of adaptation and the *outcome* of the programme.

Context

In terms of context, the evaluation took place in three prisons (two Category C and one high security) for male offenders. Two groups had committed sexual offences and the third group had committed violent offences. 24 participants were enrolled in the pilots, and all but one completed the programme. It was not possible to pilot the adaptation in community settings or with female offenders.

The evaluation explored factors that might promote the adaptation of programmes and factors that might inhibit this process. This enabled the evaluation team to understand what is required to implement the adapted programme in another setting. It was clear that all three prisons are very effective in their delivery of programmes and all had a genuine commitment to support prisoners with intellectual disabilities. This is a tribute to the programme teams and to the prison regimes where they work. It may be important to ensure that acceptable levels of commitment and effectiveness are in place in other settings before extending any delivery of the adapted programmes. This is especially important given the current role of Key Performance Targets (KPTs) for the delivery of programmes. KPTs are highly influential in the management of programmes across a prison. KPTs will need to be adapted in settings where adapted programmes are used, as the adapted programmes require more sessions and smaller groups.

In respect of context, the other significant issue relates to the identification of people with intellectual disabilities in the prison population. Currently this occurs on an informal basis with programme teams relying on observation and informal communication. It is more than possible that individuals will not be identified as intellectually disabled. Whilst a number of prisons are rolling out the use of a screening tool known as LDSQ with the aim of screening prisoners and identifying intellectual disability; this is being run by the health teams and may be kept "in confidence". Implementation of adapted programmes can only be as good as the system to identify participants.

Mechanism

The evaluation of mechanism is essentially a detailed description of the adaptation process itself. It shows that the process was based on a rationale with two founding principles. The first was to ensure that the original assumptions and testing for TSP were not undermined in the adaptation. The second was the systematic application of theoretical principles relating to people with intellectual disabilities. Working from this rationale, the process of adaptation was an iterative one where drafts were tested using key stakeholder groups and then further revised on the basis of the pilots themselves.

Outcome

Outcome was evaluated using a number of approaches based on Kirkpatrick's model for evaluating the outcome of training programmes (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2009). The outcome of ATSP was evaluated by gathering evidence on three levels: impact – how participants reacted to the programme; what was learned, and what changes in behaviour resulted from the programme. The fourth level - the overall result - was beyond the scope of this study as it would involve looking at overall re-offending and other long term measures of success. It was stressed at the outset that the original TSP was developed using a robust evidence base and well established methods and in recognition of this the programme had been fully accredited by the Correctional Services Advice and Accreditation Panel in 2010. A study to look at long term outcomes was not therefore to be a focus of the adaptation project. It was necessary, however, to collect simple 'before and after' measures without the use of control groups or other more rigorous designs. It was also noted that psychometric outcome measures for this population are limited and this is a matter of concern.

Notwithstanding the need for rigorous outcome measurement, there was good evidence of progress for many of the individuals across three pilot sites and a number of examples are given in the evaluation report. There remain many challenges for offenders with intellectual disabilities but this evaluation does suggest that ATSP can play an important role in the work that is required to reduce re-offending in this vulnerable group.

Working together

Fundamental to the success of this project was close collaboration between DH, NOMS and the Foundation. This involved establishing a common starting point, negotiating differences in organisational culture and developing day-to-day working relationships at every level of the two organisations. All this took place in the context of significant organisational change for NOMS in particular, with NOMS restructuring and the change in the delivery landscape (i.e. the introduction of NOMS commissioning intentions, which outline the scope of what interventions should be delivered for which offender groups and should be followed in each locality).

Due to NOMS restructuring there was a change in key personnel during the initial (setting up) stages of the project, in addition to the organisational changes. This meant that the project required re-assessment and it was vital to establish how the aims of both organisations could benefit through the partnership. The Foundation offered expertise in working with individuals with intellectual impairment and IU brought significant experience in programme development, particularly working towards the Correctional Services Accreditation and Advisory panels (CSAAP) requirements. It was also vital for both parties to remember that the aim of the project was to test the feasibility of adaptation as opposed to the development of the programme as a finished product.

Through these discussions an atmosphere of trust began to develop and effective collaboration flowed from that relationship. It was necessary to establish a common understanding of concepts such as evaluation and learn about the custom and practice of programme development in NOMS. The project team had to understand and, where possible, adapt to the approach of NOMS to developing and delivering programmes, recognising the national perspective of programme delivery. This was particularly pertinent to adaptations of the programme, as NOMS needed to ensure that these were in keeping with the original TSP programme. We worked through this via discussions and consultation, trialling ideas and reflecting on them post-delivery. This took time and a good deal of effort on all sides; it led to some delays and probably some frustration on all sides, but it was important that we took the time to understand one another's remits and approaches.

The process was aided significantly by having a consistent NOMS team from the Interventions Unit for the latter part of the project (development and piloting): people who demonstrated great commitment to the project aims and took on extra work to help make it a success. The prison facilitator teams also showed great interest in the project and took on extra work to accommodate the pilots. The commitment from all involved has resulted in the development of an adapted version of TSP that will be taken to CSAAP for advice in November 2013 and we have also forged positive links between both organisations and a good deal of learning about how projects such as these might be delivered in the future.

Conclusion

We have achieved the revised project aim and tested the feasibility of adapting the TSP programme for offenders with a low IQ. The evaluation report shows that this is a feasible option, with positive benefits for those offenders participating in the programme. We appreciate that this is only a small scale pilot of three groups delivered within custody to 23 offenders. However, we feel that there is a long term future for adapted TSP within the suite of NOMS accredited programmes. To this end the Foundation has invested a significant amount of time developing the programme manuals following completion of the pilots. The Foundation team is pleased to be able to provide NOMS with the manuals and evaluation report to support them in taking the programme to CSAAP for advice in November.

To date CSAAP have had limited involvement with the project and the future development of the programme will depend upon the feedback received from CSAAP. At this point, NOMS will need to make a decision regarding its future, in terms of the resources required to work towards accreditation, how the programme fits with NOMS commissioning intentions and the need for the programme within the offender population. If the decision is made to continue to work towards accreditation, the programme will be further developed in line with the feedback received from CSAAP. It is also assumed that, prior to taking the programme back to CSAAP, the revised version will need to be piloted and evaluated again to ensure NOMS can provide a full account of the delivery to CSAAP members. If the programme is accredited, it will be another intervention within the NOMS suite that will be available for commissioners as an option to meet the needs of their local offender populations effectively.

We believe that the project has also demonstrated the value of bringing together different perspectives and expertise to develop a programme. As noted above, there has been useful learning about what this entails. We hope that NOMS may consider adapting or

developing other programmes to meet the needs of offenders with learning disabilities, in both custody and community settings.

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