

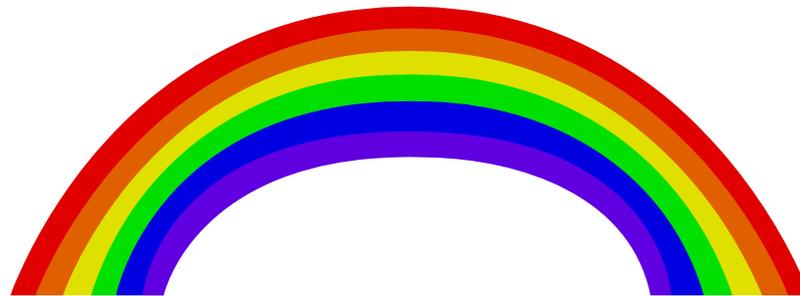
Autism in the UK – an overview and implications for Criminal Justice System

Carol Povey

Director of the Centre for Autism

What is autism?

- Spectrum Disorder / Condition
 - Widely variable
 - Affects all levels of IQ and functioning
- Affects around 1 in 100
 - More males than females



Characteristics of autism



- Recognisable pattern of behaviours
 - Communication difficulties
 - Social interaction difficulties
 - Difficulties with imagination and flexible thinking
 - Repetitive behaviours
 - Sensory and processing difficulties

Communication

- Often a very different style of communication –
 - Factual, one sided, expressive and receptive levels may not correlate
- Where language does develop may be stilted or literal
- Difficulties understanding non-verbal communication, including facial expression
- Processing delay/problems

Social interaction



- Difficulties in making sense of other people
- Reading and understanding social contexts
- Reading social cues and predicting behaviour in others
- Reading facial expression/ gesture / body posture in others
- Regulating own behaviour
- Adapting to new social situations
- Understanding the unwritten rules of interaction

Social Imagination and flexibility of thought

- World seen in concrete terms
- Inflexibility of thought (rigidity)
- Uncomfortable with change or uncertainty. High dependence on order and predictability
- Repetitive behaviours and (sometimes elaborate) routines
- Find it hard to imagine what others are thinking or feeling
- Organising and planning ahead can be difficult
- Difficulty with cause and effect

Sensory differences

- Heightened or reduced sensitivity to noise/sound, heat, touch, taste, sight/light
- Perceptual problems, scale, perspective
- Balance and body awareness
- Difficulty in screening out sensory stimuli
- Bombardment by sensory stimuli

Implications for individuals' lives

- Often socially isolated
- Many excluded from schools
- Very vulnerable to exploitation by others
- Difficulties in understanding relationships / friendships
- Very high links with anxiety and depression
- Difficulties in understanding the impact of their behaviour on others
- May have co morbid conditions

Policy context for adults

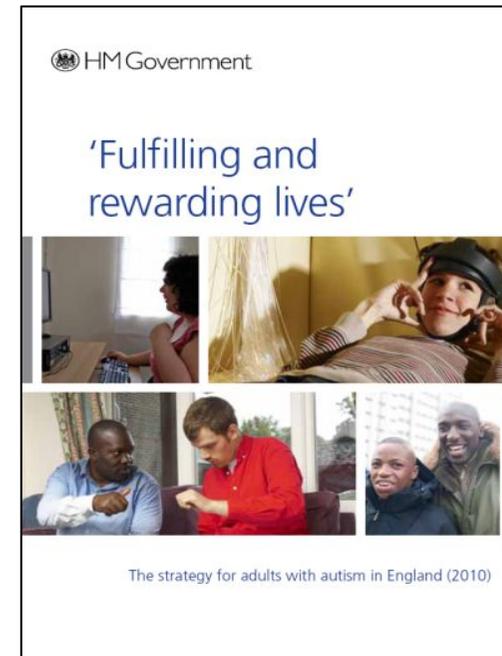
Background: *I Exist*



- The *I Exist* campaign
 - 63% of adults with autism do not have the support to meet their needs
 - 60% of parents say that a lack of support has led to higher support needs in the long run
 - 33% of adults with autism have experienced a severe mental health problems because of a lack of support
 - 15% of adults with autism have a full-time, paid job
- May 2008 – Following the launch of *I Exist*, DH announce plans for an autism strategy to be developed
- Autism Act passed in October 2009
- Strategy out April 2010
- Statutory guidance out December 2010

Autism Strategy 2010

- Improved training of all frontline professionals in autism.
- A recommendation to develop local autism teams
- Actions for better planning and commissioning of services, including involving people with autism and their parents/carers in this process
- Actions for improving access to diagnosis.
- Leadership structures at national, regional and local levels to support delivery
- Proposals for reviewing the strategy to make sure that it is working



For adults with autism this means:



“being safe from hate crime and discrimination”

For those without (this) support, the outlook is worse: the risk of severe health and mental health problems, homelessness and descent into crime or addiction”

Increasing awareness and understanding of autism

- We believe it is therefore essential that autism awareness training is available to all staff in the criminal justice sector.
- Adults should have access to the support they need – whether as victims, witnesses or perpetrators of crimes. Teams...such as the Criminal Justice Liaison teams should ensure that they have access to the expertise to support adults with autism.
- There should be care pathways through the criminal justice system.



Prevalence and rates of offending

- Small over representation in Secure special hospitals (Hare et al, 1999)
- Rates of offending higher in people with Asperger Syndrome than people with autism (but violence reported in 70% children and adults (Mills and Wing 2005))
- More likely to be victims than perpetrators (Tantam, 2000, Wing 1997)
- Overall results from studies suggest people with ASD are no more likely to offend than those without.



So what are the issues for adults with ASD?



- Hidden disability
- Lack of social instinct can lead to social misunderstanding
- Communication and processing difficulties can put people at a disadvantage.
- As witnesses, may not be listened to and believed.
- People with ASD who do offend may not understand the consequence of what they have done.

Risk factors

Possible reasons for offending related to ASD

- Offences stemming from social naivety.
- Disruption of routines
- Offences relating to misunderstanding social cues.
- Offences relating to obsession interests.

(Howlin 1997)

Implications for practice

- People working with offenders should be aware of undiagnosed / misdiagnosed people with ASD
- Be aware of not only the social and communication difficulties experienced by people with ASD, but also the sensory processing difficulties.
- Be aware of co morbid conditions which need to be taken account of.
- You may need to adapt treatment methods to take account of the autism
- Within prison and secure settings people with ASD may be very vulnerable to bullying and abuse.