# The lived experiences of prison for individuals with autism, detained on a specialist wing

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We got there!

## Abstract

There is currently extremely limited research that engages autistic prisoners directly as informants and even less research that asks them about their lived experiences of prison life. This study aims to fill this data gap and provides insights into the experiences of prisoners with autism, detained on a specialist wing, before and in the aftermath of COVID-19.

The research began by interviewing two experts from the National Autistic Society (NAS), instrumental in the design of the NAS Autism Accreditation 'Prison Standards'. These standards promote positive outcomes for autistic prisoners. The aim of Phase Two was to capture the lived experiences of prison life for individuals with autism within an environment where the NAS standards were being implemented. Fieldwork was conducted in a category B male prison in the UK over two visits, with a total of eight men with autism and three members of staff. Interviews with the first three prisoners took place in 2019, with the remaining five prisoners conducted in 2021.

Four key themes were identified: social interaction and relationships, education, adjustments, and accommodations, and COVID-19. Through exploring these themes this thesis provides new insights into the ways in which individuals with autism are at times affected by "double disadvantages" in custody. Participants during both visits described many autism-specific accommodations they found helpful, but personal circumstances, backgrounds, and individual needs determined whether such accommodations were appropriate. Lockdown and social distancing measures introduced during COVID-19 were unexpected and unplanned circumstances, which added an interesting and unique aspect to this thesis.

This thesis does not agree nor disagree with specialist wings, instead it recognises the importance of a supportive environment that can cater for the needs of individuals with autism, and questions whether this is achievable in a prison system that is overcrowded, understaffed, and designed to punish.

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## List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| MOJ | Ministry of Justice |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| HMPPS | Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service |
| NAS | National Autistic Society |
| UN | United Nations |
| EU | European Union |
| UPIAS | Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation |

## Participant identification

Phase One

| | |
|---|---|
| Annie | 'Programme architect'. An individual from the NAS involved in developing the prison standards. |
| Barney | 'Programme architect'. An individual from the NAS involved in developing the prison standards. |

Phase Two

| | |
|---|---|
| Adam | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the first visit. |
| Billy | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the first visit. |
| Carl | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the first visit. |
| Daniel | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the second visit. |
| Edward | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the second visit. |
| Fred | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the second visit. |
| George | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the second visit. |
| Harry | Individual with autism. Interviewed during the second visit. |
| Emma | Member of staff. Interviewed during both visits. Teacher on the wing. Responsible for development of staff. Responsible for educational progression of prisoners on C Block |
| Jonathan | Member of staff. Interviewed during both visits. Key worker manager |
| Mike | Member of staff. Interviewed during the second visit. Support worker on the wing and within the education department on C Block. |

# 1.Chapter One: Introduction

The number of individuals travelling through the justice system is unknown (Vinter et al, 2020). Research from the Chief Inspector of Prisons (2021) suggested that around half of the people entering prison may have some form of neurodivergent condition. Such labels include individuals with autism. For such individuals to be successfully identified, greater awareness amongst prison staff and a reliable screening tool is required (Chaplin et al, 2021). Once individuals are identified, a package of support can be implemented to create a successful rehabilitation. This study explores what this looks like for individuals residing on a specialist wing, in one prison in the UK, that is working alongside the NAS to implement the Autism Accreditation prison standards. From the viewpoint of individuals with autism, this study is of the belief that listening to and showcasing such views and experiences can help support and shape further policies and attitudes to enable such individuals to successfully rehabilitate, prior to release. With little research focusing on obtaining the important and invaluable views and experiences of individuals with autism in prison, this study is unique in that it not only successfully achieved this but did not during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1.1 Positionality and motivation

Individuals with autism share common 'challenges' with social communication and interaction, ritualistic behaviours, sensory sensitivities and managing emotions (Allely and Wood, 2022; Lewis et al, 2015; NAS, 2023; Vinter et al, 2020). A medical model approach would argue that the challenges such individuals face are a "direct result of an individual's autism" (Vinter and Dillon, 2023:62). Although this study does not, in any way, dismiss any difficulties faced by individuals with autism, taking a social model perspective, it does question how and why external barriers and the context in which individuals with autism find themselves in, can at times cause or exacerbate these challenges.

It has been argued that individuals with autism are at risk of increased 'vulnerability' when in prison (Allely, 2018; Allely and Wood, 2022; Allen et al, 2007; House of Commons, 2018) and that they therefore need 'protection'. Perceived vulnerability plays a significant part within this thesis, as those interviewed have been identified as vulnerable by professionals within the prison, which then directly affected their experience. This appears to suggest that the prison feels the need to protect those perceived as vulnerable, rather than continuing down the route of 'punishment' and allowing them to access the mainstream part of the prison. However, within a system that is designed to punish those who have committed crimes, therefore protecting society (MOJ, 2022), it does highlight the conflicting ideologies on the most appropriate way to support individuals with autism in prison, enabling success.

The MOJ makes it clear that the main goal of individuals in prison is to successfully rehabilitate, reducing the risk of re-offending (MOJ, 2022; 2021; 2010). To achieve this, it is suggested that individuals should be placed on an appropriate educational pathway to enable them to enhance their knowledge and skills, in the hope of creating better employment opportunities upon release (Coats, 2016; MOJ, 2021; 2018). Through reading and analysing reports, documents, and relevant literature around prisons, it is evident that the justice system relies heavily on education to fulfil its aim of successfully rehabilitating individuals in prison. This is also reflected in the National Autistic Society's (NAS) Autism Accreditation Programme, The Prison Standards. This study recognises the significant role education plays in the lives of individuals with autism in prison, however, it will examine to what extent this has a direct impact on their abilities to be successful within prison and be prepared for life within the community.

Prisons are bound by international and UK legislation, ensuring that all whose liberty has been deprived still have their human rights met. For individuals with autism, this also means that reasonable adjustments are to be made to ensure they are not put at a substantial disadvantage compared with other prisoners who are not disabled. The reasonable adjustments duty must inform good practice, placing obligations on prisons to be 'anticipatory' and taking steps to ensure barriers are removed which may prevent inclusion and equal opportunities (Lawson and Orchard, 2021). This study will explore what changes and adaptations Prison AA has implemented, to prevent individuals with autism experiencing prison more harshly than non-disabled prisoners. Interviews with eight individuals with autism and 3 members of staff took place over two visits, 30 months apart, for various reasons which will be outlined in chapter three of this study. Individuals interviewed had a diagnosis of autism and consequently were placed on a wing that was segregated from the general prison population, due to their perceived 'vulnerability.'

Through analysing policies, reviews, and academic literature, it is evident that the voices and experiences of individuals with autism are absent. Such individuals are experts in their own experiences (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2021), therefore the primary purpose is to listen and showcase these. By doing so, professionals and policy makers can make better and more informed decisions that then directly affect the lives of individuals with autism in prison.

When I was eight years old, my 2-year-old younger brother was diagnosed with autism. His behaviours were so 'severe' that he was unable to access mainstream nursery, due to difficulties in communicating his needs, which presented as perceived challenging behaviours. Subsequently, this often left my family housebound, due to the significant challenges he faced when in his community. The lack of awareness

amongst services and professionals trained to offer support was heartbreaking, leaving our family lost in a system with minimal guidance. The passion and dedication I have stemmed from the requirement to source appropriate support, and fight for his rights. This passion led me to complete a Diploma in Childcare at the age of 16, obtain my BA Hons degree in Learning Disability Studies and my MA in Critical Disability Studies, all with the view of enhancing my knowledge and understanding of how to meet the individual needs of people with autism.

My professional career has also been dedicated to supporting individuals with autism within a mainstream educational setting. For over 10 years, I have worked in a mainstream high school as an Assistant SENDCo and ASC Lead. My responsibilities include coordinating support, planning and delivering targeted interventions as well as complete referrals for young people with autism or who are displaying typical characteristics. I can identify how the 'mainstream norms' do not suit individual needs and how individuals with autism find themselves displaying perceived negative behaviours for reasons relating to their autism, often resulting in negative consequences for them. This is something I continue to challenge, offering support to primarily young people with autism, but also the entire school community, creating a culture of awareness and understanding.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study was organized into two phases. Phase one, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with two individuals from the NAS, helped build upon preexisting theoretical frameworks, and set out core aims for Phase Two. Phase Two was the main data collection for this thesis, and involved interviewing individuals with autism, alongside three members of staff. This design and processes are discussed in more detail in chapter three of this thesis. Two research questions underpin this thesis:

1. In what ways do the National Autistic Society's Autism Accreditation Programme's Prison Standards affect the outcomes for individuals with autism?
2. Who does the National Autistic Society's Autism Accreditation Programme's Prison Standards work for, under what circumstances, why and how?

## 1.3 The National Autistic Society's Autism Accreditation Programme

Autism accreditation is an internationally recognised autism-specific programme, introduced by the NAS to help support and develop services for individuals with autism (Hughes, 2017). The programme was established in response to the Community Care Act 1990, which highlighted the considerable number of individuals with autism receiving insufficient care (NAS, 2024a). With a big drive on assessment and

delivery of appropriate support for individuals with autism, the Act supported what the NAS had been advocating for. Therefore, in 1992, the UK's only autism-specific support programme was developed and introduced. Initially, support via the programme was provided to care and educational settings, however it was evident detention establishments would also benefit from the guidance and assistance. Working alongside HMP & YOI Feltham, the NAS developed what is now known as 'The Prison Standards,' with the prison being awarded Autism Accreditation in 2016.

When an institution or organisation applies for accreditation, they begin a three-year process in which standards are set, and individualised aims are made. For prisons, these standards focus on education, healthcare as well as care and custody, with particular attention given to training, adjustments, mental and physical health as well as sensory sensitivities (Hughes, 2017). All prisons involved work alongside the NAS, who help them to make positive changes to ensure individual needs are met by trained and knowledgeable staff (Lewis et al, 2015). The core consensus is that if all standards are adhered to, it will reduce the difficulties faced by individuals with autism in prison (Lewis et al, 2015). The understanding and awareness of autism is something that the NAS strives to achieve across all sectors, including prisons, expressing that if professionals are more knowledgeable, then individuals with autism may face fewer barriers to equal participation and inclusion (Hughes, 2017). Since fieldwork ended, Prison AA has now been awarded an 'advanced accreditation award' for their hard work and dedication to supporting individuals with autism.

## 1.4 Prison AA

This study was conducted in one male prison within the UK, over two visits, 30 months apart. Prison AA is a category B prison, accommodating over 1600 individuals, across ten wings: eight adult and two young offender units. C Block, a "vulnerable offenders wing" designed to house individuals with autism, was central to this thesis and accommodated all participant's interviews. At the time of the first visit, the prison was working towards gaining Autism Accreditation status, but since then have achieved advanced status due to their commitment in supporting individuals with autism. Previously, Woodbury-Smith and Dein (2014) highlighted the need for prisons to introduce specialist wings to support individuals with autism, suggesting it would increase positive outcomes. Robertson and McGillivray (2015) agreed, recognising that it is not uncommon for individuals perceived as 'vulnerable' to be segregated for their own 'protection', to reduce the risk of victimisation or perceived negative behaviours. However, with the support from the NAS, Prison AA has committed themselves to designing a whole wing with the aim

to support positive outcomes for individuals with autism by providing adjustments, rather than segregation for protection.

## 1.5 The Social Model of Disability

In contrast to the Medical Model of Disability, where the ideology is that barriers are created due to an individual's impairment, the Social Model focuses on social, environmental, institutional, and attitudinal processes that may restrict an individual's ability to have access or obtain equal opportunities compared to non-disabled people. It makes clear distinctions between impairment and disability, which originally stemmed from the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (1976, 3-4).

> "impairment as lack part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; ... disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation"

Here a clear distinction is made between disability and impairment, highlighting a significant difference between an individual and the social barriers they may face. As discussed later in this chapter, terminology is crucial to understanding and recognising the social factors imposed upon individuals with autism. Thus, the Social Model aims to highlight and draw attention to disabling barriers which restrict individuals from fully accessing mainstream society, blaming external factors rather than one's impairment as the cause (Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Vinter and Dillon, 2023). Some have criticised the model of failing to recognise individuals whose impairments are hidden, such as autism, and primarily focusing on physical impairments (Walmsley, 2002; Woods, 2017). Woods (2017) argued that the Social Model is not designed or successfully implemented for individuals with autism. He gives an example of how educational settings may implement 'social skills interventions' for pupils with autism, with the notion to equip them with the communication and interaction skills required for adult life. Under the Equality Act 2010, this would be deemed as a 'reasonable adjustment' to enable such individuals to better access mainstream education, but it subsequently implies that individuals with autism should change their communication skills to fit into society. This example of what could be considered a reasonable adjustment, does not align with the ideologies of the social model of disability.

When examining some of the difficulties many individuals with autism face, it can be argued that the Social Model is poignant. For example, it is widely suggested that individuals with autism may experience sensory difficulties (APPGA inquiry, 2019), however, from a Social Model perspective, it is the bright lights, loud noises, the large crowds which are "the problem". It needs to be taken into consideration, that such problems may then negatively affect an individual. The Social Model in no way

dismisses the challenges some impairments present (Oliver, 2004) but does not identify this as the reason for social disadvantage. Instead, it focuses on the environmental, structural, and cultural barriers within society, which result in disablement.

It is important to note that although prisons are environments designed to 'punish' those committed of serious crimes, a social model perspective can still be implemented to achieve rehabilitative aims. This is evident in Halden Prison, Norway, where although they do not claim to take a social model perspective, some of their principles and implementations in relation to the design and focus on providing a rehabilitative environment, align. The environment is a significant aspect in which the Halden Prison differs from the traditional approach, with the building purposely designed to mirror the community to support a successful rehabilitation (Abdel-Salam and Kilmer, 2023). Alongside this, natural light is highly favoured with communal spaces offering floor-ceiling windows and individual cells removing security bars (Abdel-Salam and Kilmer, 2023). The consideration of the environment does align with the social model of disability, as the prison has identified potential barriers which may affect an individual's sensory sensitivities or accessibility and taken steps to overcome them.

The social model underpins this thesis and takes precedence when analysing the data obtained. Examining the environmental, structural, attitudinal, cultural, and institutional barriers prisons can cause for individuals with autism, this thesis explores how one prison dedicated to producing positive outcomes for such people, attempts to overcome these to reduce the risk of double discrimination.

## 1.6 Definitions and Terminology

This section will explore the language, terminology and approaches taken throughout this thesis, along with reasonable justifications for them.

### 1.6.1 Individuals with autism

Throughout this thesis, participants and individuals who have a diagnosis of autism will be referred to as 'individuals with autism.' Guidance published by the NAS (2024b) suggests that many individuals with autism prefer to use identify-first language, giving examples of 'acceptable' phrases. A previous study, conducted by Kenny et al (2016) who explored the many terms used within the UK to describe autism, discovered that there was not one set of preferred terms, and multiple factors within a range of contexts affect the preferred language. The conclusion was that individuals and professionals need to be aware and receptive to the beliefs and desires of individuals with autism to enable positive interaction and reduce the risk of offending (Kenny et al, 2016). This thesis was undertaken in a mainstream prison,

with individuals who had a diagnosis of autism. Not all participants referred to their autism or disclosed their diagnosis during the interview, and although this was not explored further with them, it could be suggested that this was due to the prison environment. Prisons have been described as places of mistrust, violence, and victimisation (Robertson and McGillivray, 2015). Therefore, identifying as having autism may be challenging for some individuals, whose desire is to 'fit in' to reduce stress levels and anxiety. As discussed later in this thesis, identifying as having autism creates a sense of 'vulnerability' which in turn can result in such individuals becoming subjected to victimisation, abuse, or bullying. Although this thesis does not agree with the direct correlation between diagnosis and vulnerability, it does recognise that having a diagnosis in prison can create additional challenges, especially when staff and other individuals are not aware or lack the understanding on how best to support individuals with autism. Considering this, the decision to use person-first language was based on my personal preference to always identify people as individuals first, rather than referencing their condition or disability, as well as the environment in which this research took place.

### 1.6.2 Autism/Autistic

According to the ICD-11 (2023) autism is referred to as a 'neurodevelopmental disorder' suggesting that a group of "persistent deficits" in communication, social interaction and behaviours are a common feature for individuals with the diagnosis. This medical model approach to defining autism pinpoints some of the challenges many individuals with autism may face, suggesting that due to this, such people are 'less than' or 'less worthy.' The NAS, the UK's leading charity for supporting individuals with autism, explains how autism is an umbrella term for a range of different 'forms' of autism, including Asperger's Syndrome. Autism affects everybody differently; however, many individuals share shared challenges, affecting how they behave, communicate, and interpret the world (NAS, 2023b). As each person is unique, different levels of support are required to ensure individual needs are met successfully (NAS, 2023b). For individuals with autism, who find themselves being caught up in the justice system, being undiagnosed or misunderstood could present many challenges, especially if the environment is not receptive to their needs and their form of communication is via perceived challenging behaviours.

For years there has been much controversy surrounding the most appropriate language to use when referring to individuals with autism, with many researchers, organisations and policy documents choosing to use different terms. According to the NAS (2024b) autism spectrum condition is the most used terminology. In their research, Kenny et al (2015) obtained various opinions from individuals with autism but was unable to conclude which terminology is better suited. One individual interviewed as

part of his study, stated they preferred the term ‘disorder’ because it stresses the importance of additional support, whereas another individual stated that terms such as ‘disorder’, ‘condition’, or ‘disability’ are a negative label, suggesting somebody has “something wrong with them” (Kenny et al, 2015). Over the years government policies, legislation and guidance referring to autism have all used a variety of terminology; however, the NAS concludes that language will continuously change and adapt as we learn more about autism (NAS, 2023b). In line with the NAS, autism shall be referred to as a condition throughout.

### 1.6.3 Disabled/Disability

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, later superseded by the Equality Act 2010, was a ground-breaking piece of UK legislation which helped promote the rights of individuals with disabilities and illustrated an effective anti-discriminatory legislation (Office for Disability Issues, 2011). Under the Equality Act 2010, the term ‘disability’ is described as a ‘protected characteristic’ therefore placing duty on all public bodies to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against or put at a substantial disadvantage. The Act refers to an individual as having a disability if they:

> “(a) has a physical or mental impairment, and
>
> (b) the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.” (The Equality Act 2010, Section 6)

Under this Act, individuals with autism would be considered to have a ‘disability’ therefore would benefit from public bodies taking steps to remove barriers which may restrict full participation in their social life and equal opportunities. Often within policies, reports, and legislation, autism is coupled with other terms such as disabled, but within this research, individuals with autism will be referred to directly and not coupled with the terms ‘disabled’ or ‘disability’ unless otherwise specified.

The Equality Act 2010 refers to an individual with a disability as an individual with an impairment, connecting the two labels, whereas the Social Model, as stated earlier, differentiates between the two labels. As this thesis focuses primary on individuals with autism, the use of the term ‘disabled’ unless specified, will be in reference to an individual who is experiencing social barriers, in-line with the Social Model ideology.

### 1.6.4 Vulnerability

It is necessary to define the word ‘vulnerable’ as this research is based solely on a group of individuals who were classed as such by professionals when entering the prison system and consequently are

segregated and reside on a separate wing, designed to meet their individual needs. Under the Mental Health Act 1983: Code of Practice 2015, individuals with autism are considered as having a 'mental disorder' resulting in them often being described as 'vulnerable'. Brown (2011:314) states vulnerability "implies a state of weakness" suggesting that such individuals need protection, care, and safeguarding as they cannot do this for themselves. This term has been widely used in and to shape policy and legislation within the UK when referring to individuals with autism. The latest government strategy (Department of Health and Social Care and DfE, 2021), designed to support all individuals with autism, in parts, implies a need for protection, support and help. The word 'vulnerable/vulnerabilities' is identified four times throughout the strategy, mainly when referring to having additional needs as well as autism, however, this may be due to the implied meaning that having a diagnosis of autism automatically deems an individual to be classed as vulnerable. The notion that one's impairment is a direct cause of increased vulnerability supports a medical model approach, creating a sense of dependency on professionals and carers who can provide efficient support (Oliver and Barnes, 2012).

UK legislation, such as the Equality Act 2010, was designed to enhance rights and protect society's disadvantaged groups. Although such Acts are recognised as significant in terms of anti-discrimination, by doing so it can be argued that they highlight such individuals as 'vulnerable' therefore in need of legislation to protect and ensure equal rights. Unfortunately, the inability to exercise equal rights is not uncommon for individuals with autism, due to the lack of awareness and understanding of effectively meeting their needs.

When in prison, all individuals are dependent on professionals to ensure their basic needs are met, however, such individuals are not defined as 'vulnerable' but instead are regarded as a danger to society. For individuals with autism, who participated in this research, there appeared to be a desire to protect, care for and support them, which the prison felt could only be done by segregating them on their own wing. Although this may provide comfort for some, it can be argued that this approach fails to acknowledge the attitudinal, structural, and environmental barriers which initially create perceived 'vulnerability' for individuals with autism in prison. This would not support a Social Model ideology and instead suggests that vulnerability is inherent in an individual. When the term 'vulnerable' is used within this thesis, unless otherwise specified, it will refer to an individual who is at risk of being placed in a vulnerable situation due to societal structures and barriers. For example, an elderly person might be considered vulnerable due to age-related health conditions, yet their vulnerability is initiated and

exacerbated by factors such as access to healthcare, social support networks and affordable safe living conditions. It is these external factors that create vulnerability.

## 1.7 Thesis Overview

This thesis obtains the views and experiences of eight individuals with autism detained in a mainstream prison, on a specialist wing, along with three members of staff who work closely with them. Taking a social model perspective, it considers and explores the barriers and limitations within prisons for such individuals, and how these are potentially overcome with appropriate support and adjustments being implemented by trained staff, who support on the specialist wing.

**Chapter Two:** This chapter begins by critically examining the purpose and role of prisons, from the perspective of the MOJ and HMPPS. As punishment is the primary purpose of prisons, with the plan to rehabilitate prisoners during their sentence, this chapter initially explores what this looks like for individuals with autism, who have been identified as 'vulnerable'. The ideologies of punishment vs protection are explored in relation to individuals with autism and how this can be supported within a prison setting. This chapter then presents part of the literature review of this thesis but note that this will also be continued into Chapter 4. A review of relevant documents, research, policies, and legislation are all present within this chapter, linking directly to prisons and the effect on rehabilitation for individuals with autism. The common themes arising from this review, alongside the document analysis presented in Chapter 4, helped shape both Phase one and Phase Two of this thesis.

**Chapter Three:** This chapter sets out the research methodology. It begins by discussing how this research was conducted in two Phases. Phase one, which includes a policy document review, outlined in chapter four, focuses on findings from interviews with the NAS' programme architects. Key themes emerging from these interviews, helped shape Phase Two. The aim of Phase Two was to capture the lived experiences of prison life for individuals with autism, currently serving a sentence in one UK prison, which was implementing the NAS standards. This chapter outlines how and why fieldwork was conducted over 30 months, exploring its limitations but also the unique insight into such an under-researched area. This chapter also details how the COVID-19 pandemic was a factor within the research and referencing the significance it had on the data obtained.

**Chapter Four:** This chapter outlines the scoping study, which involves semi-structured interviews with the NAS' programme architects. Data obtained during these interviews was analysed and common themes helped shape the main methodological approach, theory, and hypothesis of phase two.

Reoccurring themes, conclusions and common expectations were extracted from Phase One, allowing them to be 'tested' and explored further in Phase Two. An in-depth analysis of the NAS prison standards is presented in this chapter, identifying and explore their aims, expectations and desired outcomes for prisons implementing the programme within their setting.

**Chapter Five:** Individuals with autism may experience difficulties with social communication and interaction (NAS, 2004; Vinter et al, 2020) but this does not deter such individuals from wanting to form meaningful relationships with others (Crompton, 2020). This chapter examines the relationships between individuals with autism, staff, other prisoners as well as family connections within the community. It explores how relationships are formed and maintained within the specialist wings and what works for whom under what circumstances. The fact that all participants in this research were surrounded by others who shared the same diagnosis on the specialist wing is problematised. Additionally, this chapter examines the support provided by trained staff in forming relationships with staff, other inmates and in rekindling and maintaining positive relationships within the community.

**Chapter Six:** This chapter examines the education provided for individuals with autism in prison, from a social model perspective. Debates around what 'education' entails and how this can support a positive rehabilitation is explored. The government makes a direct correlation between education, which involves academic educational progression and the development of skills to a successful rehabilitation and reducing the risk of re-offending. Under the term 'education' the government primarily include academic progression and development of skills through higher educational courses. This chapter unpicks this, exploring whether such ideologies support the educational progression within prisons, for individuals with autism, or whether this leaves them at risk of being 'unsuccessful' within their 'rehabilitation' due to not meeting government expectations. Personal progression is highlighted as a significant factor in supporting a successful rehabilitation and reintegration back into the community. However, with this not always identified as a priority on the government's education agenda, this chapter examines the potential barriers this may cause for individuals with autism and how the adjustments and provisions Prison AA implement to ensure such individuals are not placed at a disadvantage for reasons relating to their disability.

**Chapter Seven:** This chapter focuses on the adjustments and accommodations implemented to the physical environment as well as the rules and regimes. The physical environment can have negative consequences for individuals with autism, as it can directly impact their sensory sensitivities as well as their emotional and mental well-being. This chapter explores how Prison AA recognises these barriers

and implemented appropriate adjustments to promote positive outcomes. Rules and regimes, which are a significant aspect of the daily running of a prison, are also explored further in this chapter, examining autism-specific barriers and what and how accommodations and considerations are implemented to reduce the risk of "double discrimination."

**Chapter Eight:** This final data chapter discusses the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact this had on the men on C Block. COVID-19 was a factor which could not be planned for at the onset of this study. This research persisted at an unprecedented time when most other researchers were dissuaded from entering prisons for fieldwork, which resulted in some unique insights being gained. The chapter examines the direct impact COVID-19 had on the daily experiences of individuals with autism and explores how Prison AA adapted to government legislation and policies to reduce the spread of the virus, whilst still providing appropriate support to ensure a double disadvantage did not occur. The chapter looks at the changes the pandemic brought as well as the long-term effects this has had on the daily routine of individuals on C Block in Prison AA.

**Chapter Nine:** The final chapter of this thesis is the concluson. This chapter brings together and summarises the personal accounts and experiences of individuals with autism, reflecting on success and barriers to full participation. It revisits and answers the research questions, and it makes recommendations for continuous future development. The main findings outlined in this chapter explore what works for whom, under what circumstances and why and whether initially segregating individuals with autism from the mainstream part of the prison supports positive outcomes.

# 2.Chapter Two: Autism in Prison – A literature Review

This chapter will examine the literature surrounding individuals with autism and their experiences with the criminal justice system (CJS). It will begin by evaluating the purpose of prisons, in-line with the MOJ and HMPPS aims and how individuals with autism fit into a system that caters for a 'one size fits all' agenda and is designed to 'punish' whilst rehabilitating. Critically analysing research, documents, policies, and legislation around the CJS and individuals with autism, it was apparent that very little is known about the experiences of individuals with autism in prison. This creates challenges when providing effective support on how best to help produce positive outcomes for such people.

Through analysis of documents, literature, and policies, it was evident that education plays a significant role in the running of prisons. Instrumental in proving a successful rehabilitation (MOJ, 2021), education therefore plays a significant part in this chapter. It will examine how education is currently provided within prisons and for individuals with autism, to ensure they have equal opportunities to learn, develop and make progress, all reviewed from a social model perspective. Social communication as well as adjustments were also significant aspects of the prison regime and environment which were prominent within literature, and link directly to this thesis. These themes, alongside the COVID-19 pandemic will be explored further within this chapter, examining, through a social model lens, how prisons work towards producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

## 2.1 Punishment or protection?

Prisons are designed to segregate from society individuals who committed serious and violent crimes (MOJ, 2021). Over the last two centuries, prisons have evolved from an environment designed to house individuals awaiting trial and execution, to an establishment that aims to rehabilitate to reduce the risk of re-offending (MOJ, 2022; 2021; 2010; Robinson and Crow, 2009). Policy makers and academics appear to agree that prisons are intended to *protect* society by *punishing* those who have committed offences. This can cause confusion when individuals with autism, who are considered 'vulnerable' therefore in need of protection, find themselves caught up in the justice system.

Punishment takes a central role within this part of the study, as individuals are sent to prison as punishment as well as acting as a deterrent to others participating in criminal behaviours. This research involved individuals who are currently 'being punished' for their actions. Theories surrounding the most effective way to impose punishment, whilst creating an environment where individuals can rehabilitate

is still debatable. These will now be explored further, with individuals with autism being central to the analysis.

### 2.1.1 Development of imprisonment

The concept of punishment has evolved significantly overtime, reflecting changes in society and its values. Historically, those committing crimes received punishment in the form of community embarrassment and shame in the hope that it would deter others from displaying similar criminal behaviours (Tarlow and Battell Lowman, 2018). Prisons were then establishments designed to house individuals awaiting the death penalty, with facilities, security and sanitation being extremely poor (Tarlow and Battell Lowman, 2018). The philosopher and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham, later then introduced the principle that the best actions, are that which create the greatest happiness for the greater number of people. Bentham's penal theory focused on punishment being proportionate to the crime, with a passion in understanding why individuals committed offences (Draper, 2002). With this understanding, Bentham argued that punishment within prisons should then focus on surveillance, rehabilitation and deterrence (Draper, 2002) with the aim to reintegrate individuals back into society, and deter future crimes being committed. Such theories, rooted in utilitarian principles, have influenced modern theories.

### 2.1.2 Protection Theory

This theory aims to justify imprisonment as punishment by means of retribution and deterrence. Keeping society safe and protecting them from harm has been described as prisons "primary function" (MOJ, 2021:21). Under this theory, depriving individuals of their liberty, along with other privileges, is seen as the only way to safeguard communities but also halt criminal behaviours (MOJ, 2010). Prisons are often seen as an essential component of the penal system, with many victims of crime feeling a sense of justice once imprisonment occurs (Mayjor, 2023). A sense of vengeance appears to underpin this theory, arguing that punishment is justified due to that individual causing harm or unhappiness first, and therefore consequences should be imposed - 'an eye for an eye'. This could be at the expense of an individual's mental and physical health (Metz, 2022). For individuals with autism, who may not always have a full understanding of the seriousness of their actions, or have unintentionally broken the law, imprisoning them could inflict additional trauma and hurt.

Additionally, under this theory, severe punishments such as deprivation of liberty, are seen as necessary as they act as a deterrent to participation in criminal activity. Preventing criminal behaviour can reduce

the need for places within prisons, something which is currently regarded as a national problem, with many prisons overcrowded (MOJ, 2022; 2021). It has been argued that 'lighter sentences' have not helped deter individuals away from participating in criminal activity (Kirwin, 2022; Metz, 2022) and consequently more individuals are spending time in prisons, instead of it being reserved for more serious crimes (Kirwin, 2022). The MOJ (2024) predict that over the next five years, the prison population with continue to rise, especially with the number of individuals on shorter sentences requiring a prison place.

### 2.1.3 Retribution Theory

As above, this theory also supports the notion of punishment, however places great emphasis on this being proportionate (Metz, 2022). Under this theory, individuals who commit crimes should be expected to 'pay back' society with the punishment fitting the nature of the crime. However, this fails to acknowledge the number of previous offences an individual may have committed, therefore under this theory anybody who has committed the same offence numerous times, will experience the same punishment as an individual whose committed their first offence (Metz, 2022). Simply, it appears to not recognise the importance of changing behaviours, remorse, and accountability, accepting that no matter how many times an individual may commit the same crime, they will always receive the same punishment. Additionally, this theory does not consider the needs of individuals who are identified as having a cognitive impairment (Walden, 2014). If professionals conclude that an individual lacks the understanding and awareness of their criminal behaviours, suggesting that such individuals may not comprehend that the punishment is a direct result of a 'wrongdoing' then they cannot be held responsible for their actions. Although supported by many, this does raise questions around how such individuals begin to understand and become aware of appropriate social behaviours which may cause harm to others.

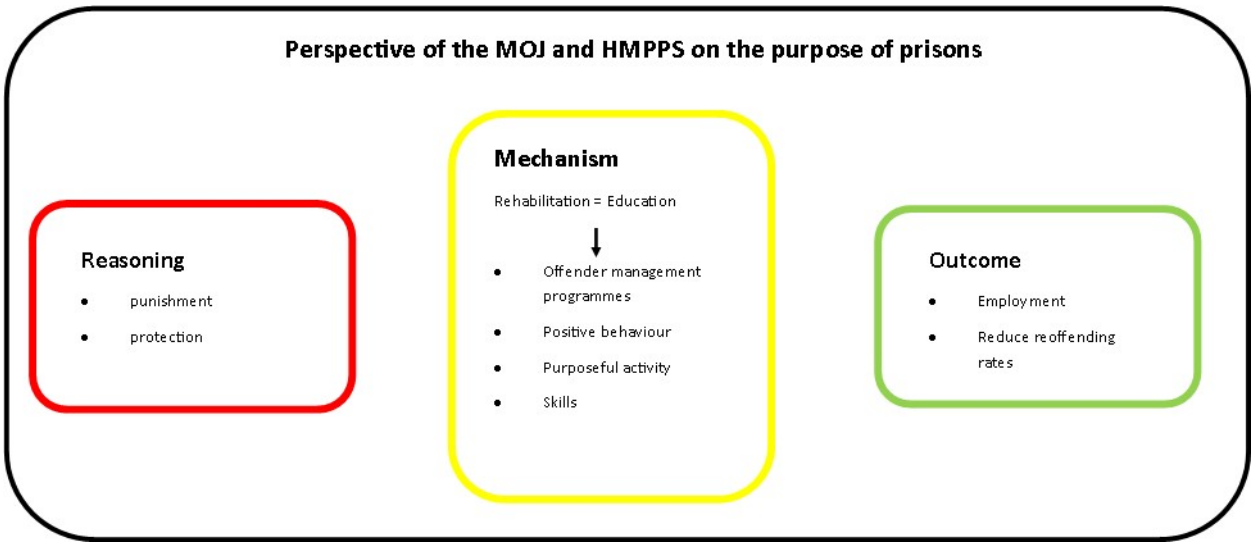
### 2.1.4 Rehabilitation Theory

The most supported ideology of punishment is rehabilitation, the idea that individuals who commit crimes can successfully change their attitudes and behaviours so they can return to society without re-offending (Mayjor, 2023; MOJ, 2022). This means that professionals in prison are to provide interventions and support which can not only change the attitudes and behaviours of the individual committing crimes, but also change their relationship with society (McNeill, 2014). It can be suggested that it may be problematic to fully achieve this, whilst individuals are in a place of punishment, deprived of 'real life' experiences. Robinson and Crow (2009:3) have previously referred to rehabilitation as

"change for the better", but McNeil (2014) later argued that this would be challenging if the individual is also being punished. The word 'rehabilitation' could be suggested as ambiguous as it can often mean different things to different people, measured differently by prisons across the UK.

Underpinning this theory is the assumption that negative social and economic factors directly contribute towards offending, therefore addressing these issues through rehabilitative treatment, interventions, and programmes, can positively contribute towards change. Many policies within the UK stress the need for individuals who commit crimes to be appropriately punished *then* appropriately rehabilitated (Mayjor, 2023; MOJ, 2023; 2022; 2021). This would indicate that punishment is the first objective, with rehabilitation secondary, with the desire that both then contribute to a successful community resettlement, free from recidivism. In her review of education, Coates (2016: i) states that "if education is the engine of social mobility, it is also the engine of prisoner rehabilitation." This review brought to light the importance of education in prisons and its significant contribution towards rehabilitation. Education and its role in prison for individuals with autism will be explore further in detail in this chapter, especially given that the MOJ and HMPPS make a direct link between education and rehabilitation. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 1. It is believed that education is key to remaining out of prison and is a provision which can be utilised when in the community.

*Figure 1: Perspective of the MOJ and HMPPS on the purpose of prisons*




### 2.1.5 Differentiated approach for individuals with autism

Browning and Caulfield (2011) have previously highlighted how some behaviours typically associated with autism may interfere with their ability to recognise why or how their actions were wrong or show

empathy and remorse for them. As they travel through the justice system, this could lead professionals to implement harsher punishments for longer, due to their lack of understanding of the effects the prison system has for such individuals. Forced to reside in an environment which is unfamiliar, frightening and is recognised as a place of mistrust and violence (Robertson and McGillivray, 2015), all with the intention to 'punish', does raise concerns about how an individual with autism could successfully rehabilitate back into society. The argument of punishment or protection is relevant here, given that individuals with autism are perceived as vulnerable, as discussed in Chapter One. Robertson and McGillivray (2015) have previously argued that such individuals would need protection when in prison, due to the risk of others exploiting them or inflicting harm. This is the direct opposite of the protection theory discussed above, as the purpose of prisons is to protect society, not those who have committed crimes. Sometimes, this desire to protect can result in individuals being transferred to secure hospitals, where healthcare and treatment is the primary purpose, instead of punishment. Previously, Myers' (2004) study, which was based on individuals with autism in secure hospital units, secure accommodation, and prisons, concluded that although 'vulnerable' individuals with autism may require protection from the mainstream prison, segregation does not always produce better outcomes, especially in relation to rehabilitation and therapeutic programmes. Since then, the transforming care programme, introduced in 2017, calls for more community-based treatment and services to be considered as an alternative to detention establishment (NHS England, 2017), with the aim to reduce the number of individuals with autism in places of detention.

The rehabilitation theory appears to be the most relevant for individuals with autism, especially if they are to be successful in understanding their actions and making better choices. Rehabilitation is often measured by the reduction in re-offending (Coates, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022b; MOJ, 2021, 2018), with education in prison playing a significant role in supporting this vision. However, for individuals with autism, their view of what successful rehabilitation is may differ from that of the MOJ, especially if employment upon release is not their primary goal. As previously stated, this thesis took a Social Model perspective, exploring the structural, attitudinal, institutional, and environmental barriers which prevent inclusion. Applying this ideology to the rehabilitation theory, this thesis explores the mechanisms implemented to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism in Prison AA.

## 2.2 Disability studies within criminology

Disabled people can come into contact with the CJS as victims, witnesses or perpetrators. To fully understand the unique experiences as well as the structural and institutional barriers faced by such individuals, an interdisciplinary approach is required. Over recent decades, disability studies have explored the link between disability and crime, with some suggesting crime is linked to specific diagnosis such as ADHD, cognitive abilities and childhood experiences (Farrington 1995, 2000). Others have argued that criminology occurs due to the structural, institutional, social and attitudinal barriers disabled people face (Dowse et al, 2009; Macdonald, 2012). This is not to discredit the effect childhood experiences have on behaviour and mental health as an adult, but instead shifting the notion that criminality is socially constructed.

In his study, Macdonald (2012) focused on the link between dyslexia and participation using data from biographical life-narratives. Macdonald (2012) rejects the psycho-medical model, which suggests participation in crime is inherited within individuals with dyslexia, due to neurological difference. Instead, he takes a social model perspective, highlighting the barriers within mainstream education, which can then lead individuals with dyslexia on pathways into criminality. Macdonald (2012) concluded that education systems should be more inclusive and supportive of individuals with dyslexia, helping them avoid criminal behaviour. This approach would not only benefit individuals with dyslexia, but many others with additional needs and disabilities.

Previously, Dowse et al (2009) study included records of around 2800 individuals with mental health needs and those with cognitive impairments. They argued that the needs of such individuals and their complex realities when they come into contact with the criminal justice system, is often overlooked. Dowse et al (2009) recognised how social disadvantage, individual impairments, institutionalization and systemic exclusion can contribute towards reoffending. Therefore, they called for a hybrid theoretical perspective, to address such challenges faced by disabled people, stressing the need to protect human rights and improve health and well-being services within the justice system.

Thorneycroft and Asquith (2021) further expanded on this by introducing the concept of “cripping criminology”. Their research aimed to critically engage with the concerns of disabled people within the CJS and challenge the ways in which ableness shapes CJS encounters. Using the concepts ‘crip’ and ‘cripping’, Thorneycroft and Asquith (2021) concluded that the experiences and voices of disabled people who come into contact with the CJS, whether a victim, witness or perpetrator, are marginalised.

If policies and practices are to be more inclusive, a greater understanding of how disability intersects with criminology is required (Thorneycroft and Asquith, 2021).

Such research highlights the importance of criminology incorporating disability perspectives, enabling a better understanding to address the unique experiences disabled people face within the justice system. Only then can adjustments be made and appropriate pathways of support be implemented quickly. The ideology that criminality is inherent in disability fails to address the barriers disabled face when they come into contact with the CJS, which could then increase the risk of re-offending.

## 2.3 Education for individuals with autism in UK prisons

Education in adult prisons has not always been seen as a priority. Recommendations from the Coates review (2016) brought to light the importance of providing education for all, concluding that it contributes to reducing re-offending rates. This review was instrumental in shaping what prisons now know to be 'education in prison' today. With a drive on education to help secure employment upon release, this section will examine the current literature surrounding what this means for individuals with autism, and how they fit into a 'one size fits all' system. Education in prison is often referred to by the government as 'learning and skills' (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a; MOJ, 2018), making a clear distinction between purposeful activity and learning. This thesis is of the belief that any form of learning, should fall under the umbrella term 'education'. This includes purposeful activity, as many individuals can still learn and develop whilst participating in fun and interesting activities. This will be explored further in this section.

### 2.3.1 The delivery of education in prison

Education for individuals with autism has drastically changed over the past 100 years, with more focus now on the inclusion and support of such young people to access mainstream learning. For individuals to be successful, their needs are to be recognised, and adjustments may need to be implemented. To do this appropriately, legal documents in the form of 'Statements of Special Educational needs' were introduced, providing educational providers with the necessary information on how best to meet individual needs. Later, the Children and Families Act 2014 replaced these with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP), with the aim of making support more triangulated, with all services coming together to offer a personalised support package. An EHCP provides individuals with complex needs the opportunity to have their needs reviewed, at least every year, up until the age of 25, should they stay in full-time education or training. This means that when an individual enters prison, the plan can be ceased, which may result in unmet needs and a lack of appropriate support. This was something

previously recognised by Coates (2016), who called for EHCP's to be continuously followed within YOI's but also stressed that this should continue into adult prisons too, until the age of 25.

The NAS recognised the importance of good quality, inclusive education, which catered for all learning needs within prisons (Lewis et al, 2015) and consequently made this one of their focuses within the Prison Standards. They recognised that education for all, referring to staff and individuals with autism, was crucial if individual needs were to be met, and successful outcomes were to occur (Lewis et al, 2015). For individuals with autism, school may have been challenging due to their individual needs not being met effectively, which could have resulted in minimal qualifications obtained (Vinter et al, 2020; Jury et al, 2021). This coupled with negative experiences of education may contribute to individuals with autism having low confidence and self-esteem when it comes to learning. These emotions could be enhanced within a prison, especially if accommodations are not implemented, catering for individual needs.

Since 2019, all individuals entering prison now undertake an initial screening assessment with aims to identify any additional needs (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a), as well as obtain background information and academic abilities. This allows prisons to gain a better insight when planning the most appropriate educational pathway. Although this appears to be a starting point, such tools have recently come under criticism, as they do not help determine the level of need an individual may require when accessing their assigned pathway, therefore a call for more in-depth screening completed by an educational psychologist may be required (House of Commons and Education Committee 2022b). However, this raises questions about the most timely and cost-effective way to conduct a full diagnostic screening of all individuals entering prison, or at least those identified or suspected of having a learning need, especially if it relies heavily on the disclosures from individuals with autism, who themselves may struggle to articulate their needs (Vinter et al, 2020).

Once academic levels are obtained, individuals with autism can begin to build a daily routine which can involve learning, work, and purposeful activity. Obtaining basic qualifications, at a functional skills level, is given the most priority (The Education and Skills Committee, 2022a). However, statistics from HM Inspectorate of Prisons and OFSTED (2022) highlight that around 57% of individuals in prison have literacy levels similar to that of an eleven-year-old. This highlights that the education programmes on offer within prisons, may need revisiting, especially if over half of the prison population are to be successful in participating in education and make progress. These statistics will involve some individuals with autism, who, coupled with this, may also experience further difficulties due to environmental,

sensory, and social barriers preventing them from participating successfully in educational opportunities. Consequently, this puts such individuals at a substantial disadvantage if barriers to full participation are not addressed and removed. Individuals with autism, who have already obtained a certain level of education, are presented with greater opportunities within their education, learning and development of skills, however, this may come at the cost of reduced support and adjustments (Coates, 2016) which can negatively affect their progress. Development of employability skills appears to be the government's primary purpose of education within prisons (MOJ, 2018; The Education and Skills Committee, 2022b), however, with prison governors having more choice and control over their budget, each individual prison may take a different stance on what and how developmental and vocational courses are implemented (Sanders, 2020).

### 2.3.2 Classroom learning for individuals with autism, in prison

Learning within the UK traditionally takes place within a classroom, with numeracy and literacy skills being identified as the priority subjects taught, as both are seen as fundamental skills for life. Unlike schools, where individuals are placed in academic sets based on their cognitive abilities and age, prisons are required to accommodate for hundreds of individuals at one time, all different ages, with a variety of educational experiences. This can present many challenges for individuals with autism, especially if their experience of education is negative and they require additional support which may be absent.

In 2016, Coates completed an independent review of prison education, with the purpose to evaluate and improve prison education for all. Several recommendations were made to help improve the delivery of education and reduce re-offending, by giving prison governors more power and control over the education opportunities available within their prison. Coates (2016) emphasized the importance of classroom learning as a crucial component of prison education, for all prisoners, promoting inclusion. Not only did Coates (2016) promote an inclusive approach, with personalised learning pathways which catered for individual needs, she also recognised the importance of supporting prisoners to re-engage with learning. Coates (2016) argued that an inclusive approach would entail a whole-prison approach, ensuring that appropriate screening was completed, personalised pathways of support were implemented, as well as offering a wide range of resources to ensure participation is successful. This could include the use of digital materials, coloured paper/filters and communicating information in a variety of ways.

For individuals with autism, school may have been challenging due to their individual needs not being met effectively, which could have resulted in minimal qualifications obtained (Vinter et al, 2020; Jury et

al, 2021). Negative experiences of education may contribute to individuals with autism having low confidence and self-esteem when it comes to learning, therefore having additional support around re-engaging with learning is vital if they are to successfully participate. Coates (2016) concluded that if classroom learning was more engaging, pitched at the correct level and individuals were supported, then she argued it would contribute towards a reduction in re-offending. Creese's (2016) review on literacy and numeracy skills in prison also highlighted the significance in providing additional support, taking into consideration the environment in which such prisoners are expected to learn. Although Creese (2016) did not make specific reference to individuals with autism, it can be suggested that adjustments to the environment could also meet the needs of such individuals, whose sensory sensitivities need to be accommodated for. As with Coates (2016), Creese (2016) also referred to the importance of addressing negative educational experiences and offering additional support and accommodations to support individuals to overcome these. Again, although individuals with autism was not specifically referred to, it can be argued that if they are to be successful within classroom learning, an inclusive approach needs to be implemented.

Inclusive education within the classroom was still on the agenda in 2021, when the MOJ published their 'Prison Strategy White Paper'. The paper recognises the diverse needs present within the prison population and does reference individuals with autism. This acknowledgement is crucial in providing such individuals with appropriate support and recognising autism as a standalone condition, rather than coupling it with others, which can cause misunderstandings and confusion. Mirroring the views of previous research surrounding the importance of providing accessible learning spaces, the MOJ (2021) also call for a development of offender management programmes. They argue that if education is to support an effective rehabilitation and reduce re-offending rates, individuals need to be provided with opportunities to address their criminal behaviours and any substance dependencies (MOJ, 2021). For individuals with autism, these programmes may need adaptations and adjustments to the design, delivery, and content to ensure it is fully accessible and purposeful. One way this could be achieved is by implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an educational framework that aims to create an inclusive learning environment, catering to individual's needs and interests. In their latest Bulletin, Middletown Centre for Autism (2025) showcases a range of research, by various authors, that links UDL to individuals with autism. Concluding comments from all studies highlight how UDL can be successful in encouraging individuals of all ages, to engage in learning especailly when their needs, interests, sensory sensitivities and the environment is taken into consideration (Middletown Centre for Autism, 2025).Tjis was evident in Barrea Ciuran and Moliner Garcia (2023) study, where the authors examined how UDL

can be used to support individuals with autism in higher education in Spain. Their findings suggested that when inclusive environments are created, individuals with autism can learn successfully. They gave specific examples such as effective communicaton being achieved by providing visual aids as well as processing time and using clear verbal langauge (Barrea Ciuran and Moliner Garcia, 2023). The underarching conclusion from the study, was that UDL can be successful within all educational settings, however, educational providers need to listen to the voices of individuals with autism and adapt their teaching methods.

In addition to this, to the development of skills, through vocational courses was also discussed extensively in the MOJ (2021) White Paper. They made the direct link between development of skills and the increase in employment upon release, stating this would support a reduction in re-offending. Reports from the government have called for more vocational courses which can offer a specific skill set (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; MOJ, 2018). However, some individuals with autism may be unable to seek employment upon release, due to employers not making appropriate adjustments. This could lead criminal justice professionals to suggest that individuals with autism, who are unable to, or unmotivated to, obtain 'employability skills', are at an increased risk of reoffending. No data supports this notion, nor are there any recommendations to help combat this and support individuals in other ways to reduce reoffending. Some of these vocational courses would be delivered within classrooms, the MOJ (2021) did call for more flexibility to ensure accessibility for all. They discussed the use of in-cell technologies to allow prisoners to still access education if they are unable to be included within the classroom. This does increase the risk of individuals with autism, who may experience social interaction difficulties, becoming socially isolated or not receiving adequate support due to being absent from the classroom.

The most fundamental findings from all three of the above research, is the considerable number of individuals travelling through the justice system with low literacy and numeracy skills. Such skills are fundamental in not only academic progression, but to be able to access everyday activities and resources. In his research, Cresse (2016) recognised the drive for employment upon release, but called for a greater focus on the literacy and numeracy levels of the prison population. He believed that having this data would help prisons to adapt and plan appropriate offender management courses which are accessible for all (Creese, 2016). He concluded that there appeared to be a significant number of individuals with a learning need, not just those with identified additional needs, and as such, this will affect their ability to participate in education. This was later echoed by the MOJ (2021) White Paper,

who provided similar findings, stressing the significant number of individuals in prison without basic qualifications. Having low levels can limit individuals in prison as they may have difficulty reading signs, letter, or even legal paperwork, especially if these have not been provided in accessible formats (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022).

Prior to obtaining work, regardless of educational experiences or additional need, all individuals in prison are expected to obtain basic levels in literacy and numeracy. This learning would often take place within the classroom, however, as stated above, this can only be accessible if external factors are taken into consideration such as the environment, as well as content and delivery of the lesson. If individuals with autism are to be successful in making academic progress and accessing classroom learning in prison, then the recommendations by Coates (2016) and the MOJ (2021) white paper, need to be implemented.

### 2.3.3 Inclusive Education, Autism and prisons

Inclusive education is a widely debated topic, especially when considering its implications for individuals with autism and those within prison systems. Within society, for centuries, disabled children and those considered 'vulnerable' have been disadvantaged within the education system, with many not receiving an education or forced to segregate (Cook et al, 2001). The inclusion of young people with special educational needs as been a vision since the Salamanca Statement 1994 was introduced internationally (UNESCO, 1994). However, this was generally if the young person could adapt and 'fit' into mainstream education (UNESCO, 2017). In their study on individuals with autism accessing mainstream education, Humphrey and Lewis (2008) identified several challenges such individuals faced in relation to feeling included within all aspects of schooling. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) highlighted how many individuals with autism viewed their condition negatively, using derogatory and offensive language such as "retard" when referring to themselves. Social interaction both with pupils and teachers was also recognised as a barrier to inclusion, with many individuals stating their communication difficulties resulted in feeling isolated, misunderstood and alienated (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Such challenges highlight the need for a more inclusive and supportive educational approach that can address the social barriers to full inclusion.

An education system which caters for the needs of all individuals is required if social inclusion is to be achieved, however, with educational barriers still present, specialist provisions may still play a role in supporting the educational opportunities of young people with special educational needs (SEN). This type of provision has largely been criticised for social exclusion, creating further barriers and stigma

(Cook et al, 2001), yet others stress the important role special schools play in creating an 'inclusive society' (Merrigan and Senior, 2021). Merrigan and Senior (2021:288) advocate for special schools to also be included in the inclusive education agenda, as they believe emphasis should be placed on "strengthening and promoting the capacity and responsibility of the entire education system, rather than just the mainstream school sector". They argued that the stigmatization around social isolation and exclusion special schools create is an outdated ideology and instead focus should be on the bespoke educational opportunities they can provide for individuals with complex needs.

If an individual enters the prison system, educational opportunities could be limited, as discussed later in this chapter. Without the resources and often expertise, prisons are limited to the educational opportunities they can provide individuals with SEN. But the MOJ (2021) do promote an 'inclusive education system' which incorporates all individuals within the classroom. Calling for greater identification of individuals with additional needs, and educational pathways of support being implemented, the MOJ (2021) recognise the importance of prisoners obtaining basic qualifications whilst in prison, with individuals with SEN being included in this. Coates (2016) has previously highlighted 'a one size fits all' system does not cater for those with additional needs, and adjustments are required if such individuals are to participate in education. However, many years later, the MOJ (2021) fails to acknowledge how prisons can successfully do this, given the wide range of complex needs present in prisons and the space and time to support individuals to succeed. Taking into consideration the environment, as well as a busy education wing, where the aim is to provide educational opportunities to a number of prisoners, in one classroom, individuals with autism and those with additional needs, may become excluded. These debates highlight the complexities of implementing inclusive education and its implications this has for autism and prison systems. Balancing the benefits of integration with the need for specialized support is key to achieving positive outcomes.

### 2.3.4 Barriers to prison education for individuals with autism

Some of the barriers which individuals with autism may face when accessing prison education have been identified in previous research and reports, such as Coates (2016) and the MOJ (2021) White Paper, discussed earlier in this chapter. These include an inaccessible environment and insufficient support to enable those with lower literacy and numeracy skills and with negative educational experiences, to successfully access classroom learning. However, for individuals with autism, whose experiences may have been affected by the lack of autism-specific adjustments, without awareness of staff and an entire

system approach, accessibility may still be restricted (Coates, 2016). Such adjustments include processing time, visual aids and scaffolding of information to name a few.

Slater et al (2023) examined the perceptions of prison education from individuals who have committed sexual offences. Although the study does not refer to individuals with autism, it is interesting to note that they discovered that a lot of participants were disengaged from education due to its quality and their lack of confidence in seeking employment upon release due to the nature of their conviction (Slater et al, 2023). This could be the case for individuals with autism in prison, who may struggle to access prison education due to inaccessibility but then also may have difficulty seeking employment upon release. For such individuals, morale and confidence within education may be low, due to them being unable to identify a purpose or see a positive outcome (Slater et al, 2023). Additionally, inaccessible, or ineffective education could consequently lead individuals with autism to become bored, frustrated, disengaged, or lack the motivation to succeed, resulting in them participating in perceived 'challenging behaviours' (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2014) which could lengthen their sentence. This does raise concerns around whether individuals with autism should be penalised for behaviours which have been caused by inaccessibility, something out of their control (DfE, 2012; Jury et al, 2021; Prison Reform Trust, 2022).

Those on shorter sentences, that is twelve months or less, are unable to apply for higher educational courses, including level 2/3 certificates and degrees, due to the time left on their sentence (OFSTED, 2009). Individuals on longer sentences must have a minimum of six years left; 'the six-year-rule', for them to be eligible to apply for higher education or open University courses. Such restrictions have recently come under criticism with House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a) reporting how individuals who participate in higher educational courses are less likely to reoffend, therefore have recommended that the DfE re-evaluate the 'six-year-rule'. This would provide individuals with an opportunity to make educational progress, promoting motivation and enthusiasm for learning, which will hopefully continue once leaving prison. However, in their latest report, House of Commons and Education Committee (2022b) states how the DfE have rejected this recommendation, concluding that prisons should boost their work and skills developments, promoting employability. For some, obtaining employment outside of prison may not be a priority or realistic, therefore participation in work and skill development vocational programmes may not be a motivating factor, restricting them from continuing their education and learning. This solidifies the government's aim of education for employment, not education to enhance learning and knowledge.

Education and learning can promote a positive ethos across the prison community (Coates, 2016), supporting individual's mental well-being, behaviour, self-confidence, and employability skills (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a). However, in some prisons, individuals are often forced to choose between education and paid work (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022) with many often preferring to work to obtain a small income. To help overcome this, many prisons have introduced minimal educational requirements, such as the need for individuals to obtain basic levels in numeracy and literacy, before paid work can commence (OFSTED, 2009). This was previously evident in Creese (2016) study, with staff participating stating that they believed this method had been beneficial as more individuals were motived to learn to gain employment. However, this does raise concerns for individuals with autism, who may struggle to meet the literacy and numeracy standards and are therefore excluded from employment opportunities for reasons out of their control (Vinter et al, 2020).

### 2.3.5 The role of purposeful activity

Alongside, or sometimes instead of, work and learning, purposeful activity is introduced to fill prisoners' days. The definition of what is 'purposeful' is unclear, with policies and academic research giving varied descriptions. Without a clear explanation, prisons may struggle to implement appropriate and effective activities for the individuals they support. In her report, Coates (2016) does not define what is meant by purposeful activity, but she does appear to recognise this as separate to education. She called for governors to implement more activities that are not "traditionally labelled as education" (Coates 2016:4), especially when trying to engage individuals considered to have a learning need. Introducing such activities which match personal interests can increase self-esteem and confidence, reducing frustration and boredom (The Education and Skills Committee, 2005). Yet, research still suggests that there are too many hours during the day where individuals are not participating in any structured activities (Criminal Justice Alliance, 2021) which could have a detrimental effect on their mental well-being.

In her study, which was conducted in 'Special Units' across several prisons in Scotland throughout the 1990s, Ormerod (2008) reports how participants proclaimed that animals that resided at the prison, including cats, pigeons, snakes several tropical animals and much more, were extremely beneficial to reducing stress and help them relax, in what is considered to be a restricting and challenging environment. Upon interviewing staff Ormerod (2008) explained how they noticed a significant difference in the atmosphere, as well as changes to individuals' behaviour. The presence of animals can be a calming influence, especially for individuals with autism. This has been recognised by the NAS, who

have recently accredited a dog charity for their incredible work with assisting such individuals within the community. Continuously, Burrowes (2013) conducted research for NOMS exploring the links between art projects and mental health. They discovered that art could provide individuals with an outlet for expressing themselves appropriately, as well as helping individuals to learn about emotions (Burrowes, 2013). For individuals with autism, who may experience difficulties in understanding their emotions and the emotions of others, art may be a constructive way of supporting them to manage their emotions especially in a restricted and stressful environment such as prison.

Stephenson et al (2020) argued that purposeful activity in prisons is extremely important as it promotes positive mental well-being. In their study they discovered that individuals who participate in activities which are of interest to them, such as physical education and family visits, often have reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Stephenson et al, 2020), promoting a heathier environment. Although previous research has proven the benefits of purposeful activity, defining it as different and separate to traditional education within the classroom, it could be suggested that this is still not being mirrored within criminal justice guidance and policies. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021a) define purposeful activity as 'time out of cells' where individuals 'participate in activities that support their rehabilitation'. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, HMPPS and the MOJ believe that a successful rehabilitation involves participation in education and development of skills, therefore it could be suggested that this definition is not in-line with previous research, but instead continues to promote education, learning and development of skills as the key to rehabilitating.

### 2.3.6 Rehabilitation for individuals with autism

Previously, Robertson and McGillivray (2015) and Allely (2015) have discussed the need to focus on rehabilitating individuals with autism, encouraging and enabling them to participate in Offender Management Programmes, which can help them begin to understand the nature of their behaviours. Both studies suggest that some individuals with autism may have great difficulty fully understanding the seriousness of their actions or obtain any successful strategies on how best to overcome tricky situations which may lead to them reoffending (Alley, 2015; Robertson and McGillivray, 2015). Currently, there are no offender management programmes aimed solely at supporting individuals with autism to address their mistakes. Although this may suggest that prisons are being inclusive, ensuring reasonable adjustments are in place to enable such individuals to participate in mainstream courses, it does also raise concerns around a 'one size fit all' approach (Crabbe, 2016), which can often result in individuals with autism being excluded due to inaccessibility. Additionally, such courses are delivered in small

groups (MOJ & HMPPS, 2022), which may be problematic for individuals with autism who may struggle with social interactions, especially within a group setting. Without reasonable adjustments, individuals with autism may be excluded from such programmes and prevented from equal participation. However, with appropriate support, some have argued that such courses can be effective when delivered by trained staff, target the correct individuals, and are pitched at a suitable level for all learning needs (Creese, 2016; MOJ & HMPPS, 2022).

## 2.4 Social Communication and interaction

Socialisation within prison is often seen as important to 'survival' (De-Viggiani, 2018) with many individuals forming friendships with others who share similar interests to pass the day, for alliances and increase self-esteem, confidence and moral (Powis et al, 2019). For individuals with autism, who may have difficulties with social communication, forming such bonds when in prison can present challenges, given the stressful, frightening, and unfamiliar environment. Nevertheless, interactions are important and necessary, especially within a prison setting where individuals have no control over who they share their environment with. This section will explore what communication and interaction looks like in prison, for individuals with autism.

### 2.4.1 Induction processes

The purpose of the induction process is to ensure that invaluable information is shared, and individuals entering prison receive the most effective and supportive pathway for their individual needs. This is also reflected in The Prison Rules 1999, stating that all prisons should have an induction programme which allows new arrivals to be introduced to the prison, as well as having their individual needs accessed. Taking a social model perspective, this process may present barriers for individuals with autism, especially if information is inaccessible, communication is not clear, and processing time is not given by trained and aware staff (Loucks and Talbot, 2007), which could result in unidentified and unmet needs.

Throughout the induction process, a lot of information is shared with new arrivals around the expectations, rules, and regimes of prison. Such information is delivered in written or verbal format. For individuals with autism, who may struggle with written and verbal communication, this process may present difficulties. This was something McCulloch (2012) has previously discovered, highlighting how all participants within their study identified the induction stage as problematic due to limited communication adjustments. Participants within McCulloch's (2012) study described how this stage was extremely stressful due to it being inaccessible for them, resulting in key information being missed. Although the needs in McCulloch's (2012) study may differ from that of individuals with autism, the lack

of adjustments and accessible formats provided to ensure successful information sharing was a barrier during this initial stages of prison.

More recently, there has been recognition of the importance of providing easy-read versions of prison documentation, ensuring accessibility and equality for all individuals entering prison (NHS England and HMS Improvement, 2021). Additionally, having more key workers or peer support during the induction stage could provide invaluable as they can also help communicate key information (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2023). However, evidence suggests that such resources are not readily available in all UK prisons (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023).

The induction process is something the NAS Prison Standards identify as significant, and as such, is *Part One* of the standards. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, when the Prison Standards are critically analysed.

### 2.4.2 Interactions with other individuals in prison

It is well documented that social communication presents challenges for individuals with autism, especially when people around them are unable to adapt their communication style to ensure information is shared successfully and understood. Within a prison context, where individuals with autism are surrounded by unfamiliar people, such challenges may be more prominent, as such individuals may not share a common awareness and understanding. This could result in misunderstandings, conflicts and in some instances physical violence (Gomez de la Cuesta, 2010; Vinter et al, 2020). Vinter et al (2020) study focused on the experiences of individuals with autism in prison. They discovered that social interaction was a significant challenge, due to the lack of awareness and acceptance from other prisoners, which sometimes resulted in altercations. One participant in their study gave an example of reading the emotions of others, and responding accordingly, stating that they sometimes are unaware if they have offended somebody, as this was not the intention. The lack of visible empathy or remorse from an individual with autism may appear to be rude, which can then lead to conflicts and altercations, if awareness of autism is not present.

Despite the associated difficulties with social interaction for individuals with autism, the desire to form meaningful relationships is still present (Crompton et al, 2020). Crompton et al's (2020) study explored the social experiences of individuals with autism, from their perspective as well as their friends and family. The study highlighted how positive social relationships are important to individuals with autism, however, they felt much more comfortable establishing such relationships with others who share the

same diagnosis. Participants in their study also stated how they felt a sense of belonging, as those who shared their diagnosis had similar experiences, difficulties and a greater awareness and understanding of individual needs (Crompton et al, 2020). Within a prison context, individuals with autism are often surrounded by prisoners who do not share such understandings. However, the individuals who participated within this thesis all had a diagnosis of autism, and resided on the same wing, which was designed for individuals with autism.

Although not in the context of a prison, Forster and Pearson (2020) highlighted that when individuals with autism share an environment or social space, they can feel the need to 'fit in' regardless of the challenges this presents. They referred to this as 'camouflaging'. They concluded that the desire to participate in such behaviours to establish perceived positive relationships could lead to individuals with autism to be ridiculed, isolated or subjected to abuse. Taking a social model perspective, this appears to be a lack of awareness amongst society and their ability to appropriately include individuals with autism, resulting in them taking extreme measures to try and 'fit in'. Within a prison context, this could create further barriers as individuals are restricted to who they can socialise with and for how long. Without a greater awareness and understanding amongst the prison population, individuals with autism may find themselves socially isolated.

### 2.4.3 Interactions with other individuals with autism in prison

Discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, this fieldwork was conducted on a specialist wing, in one UK prison, designed to support positive outcomes for individuals with autism. All prisoners who reside on the wing have a diagnosis of autism or are displaying significant characteristics, typically associated with autism, and this is being explored further. Consequently, this results in individuals predominately socialising with individuals with autism, and staff. Extensive searches of online articles, journals and books do not provide any data of the impact this has for individuals with autism, who reside in a prison.

Similar to Crompton et al (2020) findings, Briot et al (2020) argues that for individuals with autism, who experience negative social interactions, it is often with others who do not share a diagnosis. This social barrier is due to the lack of awareness, knowledge and attitudes of such people, and their inability to appropriate converse with individuals with autism. Briot et al (2020) argued that this can contribute towards social anxiety for individuals with autism. However, from a social model perspective, individuals with autism should not have to surround themselves with others who also share a diagnosis, just to have a positive social interaction. Instead, social barriers need to be removed so that individuals with autism feel as comfortable as possible in social situations.

### 2.4.4 Interactions with staff in prison

It has been argued that positive relationships between staff and prisoners are fundamental to the success of the whole prison system (Crewe, 2011; Liebling, et al 2010). Using numerous examples, Liebling et al (2010) defines 'success' in this instance as fewer altercations, less aggression from individuals in prison, increased respect, and an overall pleasant atmosphere. With an ever-changing prison community, which has seen an influx of younger individuals serving longer sentences, and fewer individuals being released, (MOJ, 2022), staffing and the way support is provided has had to develop too. For individuals with autism, providing the right support to enable positive outcomes can prove challenging, especially when staff are expected to provide multiple roles such as listener, support, enforcer, safety, care, communicator, and educator (Waltz, 2015).

Each member of prison staff, although expected to adhere to the same rules, operate in different ways. Their approach to the relationships they develop with other staff as well as individuals with autism in prison, can largely depend on their occupational history, age, resilience (Morrison and Maycock, 2021) and their ability to leave the 'job at the door'. It can be difficult to find the balance between displaying authority and control, as well as providing empathy and understanding, especially in situations that may be challenging. Furthermore, with the increase of individuals with additional needs, mental health concerns and autism, all prison staff are now expected to be trained in how best to recognize, understand, accept, support, and rehabilitate such individuals successfully (Durcan, 2021). This can be achieved through established positive relationships.

Due to the suspected number of individuals with autism within the prison system rising, this demonstrates that there is a greater need for more trained staff, especially if positive outcomes are to be achieved (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2021). This appeared to be evident in Vinter et al's (2020) study, where they discovered that many participants felt that their needs would be better understood and met, if all staff across all aspects of the prison, had awareness training. Although it is recognized that this is costly, as well as may cause additional pressures to an already understaffed system, the long-term benefits may outweigh this. However, a whole system approach is what is needed to ensure social, environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers within prisons are removed (Vinter et al, 2020).

Upon an inspection of one UK Prison dedicated to promoting positive outcomes for individuals with autism, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2019) highlighted how relationships between staff and prisoners had drastically increased, with bonds now being formed that were strong and respectful. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2019) suggested that these positive relationships had contributed towards

increased self-esteem and well-being, allowing prisoners to feel listened to, knowing that staff had a greater understanding of their needs. Creating an environment that recognises the importance of an entire system approach as well as successfully recognise and respond to the individual's needs of autism, can contribute towards positive outcomes for such people.

### 2.4.5 Maintaining communication with individuals within the community

Literature involving the families of individuals in prison has been largely under researched (Lanskey et al, 2019) with extensive internet searches providing no research focusing solely on the families of individuals with autism in prison. It has been argued that family contacts are a vital support network for individuals with autism when they are in prison (Hollomotz and Talbot 2018), with some suggesting that such relationships can support an individual's rehabilitation and reduce the risk of reoffending (Doxey and Woodall, 2012; Farmer, 2017; Lanskey et al, 2019). Therefore, it does seem surprising that this data collection is overlooked. For positive bonds to remain, communication between families within the community and an individual in prison must continue throughout their sentence. This communication could be in the form of letters, telephone calls and prison visits. For individuals with autism, who may struggle with their literacy skills (Vinter et al, 2020), telephone calls and prison visits may be the preferred method of communication.

The Farmer review (2017) was commissioned to examine the link between positive family connections and re-offending. The report highlights that maintaining and reestablishing family connections whilst in prison can support a successful rehabilitation and significantly reduce re-offending rates (Farmer, 2017). Farmer concluded that families can not only offer individuals the resettlement support once released, but whilst in prison support their emotional and mental well-being, something which contributes towards a successful rehabilitation. Farmer (2017) does not refer to individuals with autism once, however, conclusions from the report are still as much important to them as non-disabled prisoners. Yet, in a recent report, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2023) highlighted the lack of focus on supporting individuals to reconnect and maintain positive relationships with family within the community. Again, individuals with autism were not directly identified, but they will have undoubtedly been included in the data collection. Examining this through a social model lens, it could be suggested that the lack of acknowledgement for individuals with autism creates additional barriers, as their individual difficulties to maintain such relationships, more so than their non-disabled peers, are not being formally recognised, which could create further barriers to obtaining such support.

In their study, Hart-Johnson and Johnson (2020) recognised how the role of a prison officer has changed, with many now taking on many roles when offering support. Their study focused on the perceptions of staff member's roles during prison visits, concluding that many felt their roles expanded further than to safeguard families but instead stretched to offering a comfortable environment where positive connections can be maintained. Again, this study did not include individuals with autism, nor were staff interviewed on offering support to such people, but it does highlight how adaptations to the prison can benefit not only individuals with autism, but non-disabled prisoners too. This outlook can create an inclusive environment, where social, institutional, environmental, and attitudinal barriers are removed, allowing individuals with autism to access society free from discrimination.

The Prison Reform Trust (2022) argued that regular family visits need to be promoted wherever possible, as they are vital and contribute towards a successful rehabilitation, highlighting how 47% of individuals in prison who sustained family contact and have regular visits are less likely to reoffend. In their study, Dixey and Woodall (2012) have previously highlighted how many relatives visiting a family member in prison initially felt anxiety, stress, and fear as they were entering an unfamiliar environment, designed to 'punish' their loved one. Dixey and Woodall (2012) go on to state that for many family members, prison visits were often upsetting and caused feelings of anger and despair due to their dislike of the prison system and its 'treatment' of their loved one. For individuals in prison, such visits often created the opposite feelings, providing them with a sense of belonging and some form of connection to the 'outside world', lifting their mood (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). For individuals with autism, who may be presented with additional barriers to maintaining family connections, may require additional support to write letters, manage money to make calls or to fill out visitation forms.

## 2.5 Accommodations and adjustments provided by UK prisons

The Equality Act 2010 was a significant piece of anti-discriminatory legislation which placed a duty on all providers of public functions and establishments to provide reasonable adjustments. NOMS (2020:22) state that in line with the duties of the Equality Act 2010, a reasonable adjustment is:

"*an adaptation to change a provision, criterion or practice, or to change a physical feature … that should enable a disabled prisoner to take full part in the normal life of the establishment.*"

The Act stresses that steps should be taken to remove barriers which cause disabled people to be put at a substantial disadvantage. This should be met in all areas of the prison environment including

education, healthcare, work, purposeful activity, support, and the physical environment itself. What is considered to be 'substantial disadvantage' is, according to Section 2, para 2(5) of the Equality Act:

*"(a) If a benefit is or may be conferred in the exercise of the function, being placed at a substantial disadvantage in relation to the conferment of the benefit.*

*(b) If a person is or may be subjected to a detriment in the exercise of the function, suffering an unreasonably adverse experience when being subjected to the detriment."*

Not all adjustments implemented within prisons are done so due to the legislation imposed, often accommodations are made as part of professionals demonstrating good practice. Good practice, passion, and drive to enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism, can support a successful rehabilitation. This section will examine some of them further.

### 2.5.1 Influential polices and legislation

The Autism Act 2009 is the first disability specific piece of legislation within the UK, which aims to enhance the lives of individuals with autism. Although not directly linked to individuals with autism who travel through the CJS, the Act does promote better identification of prisoners who may display characterises of autism, with appropriate support plans implemented. The Autism Act 2009 highlights how greater training and awareness of autism for criminal justice staff, can increase positive outcomes for such people. In 2021, the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection published their report on 'Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system' emphasising the need for a better screening tool, the implementation of adjustments and accommodations, greater training for staff and a more collaborative approach between agencies to provide better support and care for individuals with autism travelling through the CJS. The Home Office Neurodiversity Action Plan makes efforts to address the recommendations outlined in this report, including mechanism for ongoing reviews. Progress since publication highlights how as of 2024, dedicated neurodiversity officers are in all public prisons in England and Wales, helping to ensure that prisoners with autism receive appropriate education and rehabilitation opportunities (MOJ, 2024).

### 2.5.2 The Reasonable Adjustments Duty

As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, individuals with autism fall within the definition of a person with a disability with the Equality Act 2010. Within The Equality Act 2010, disability is a protected characteristic, resulting in public functions being required to make reasonable adjustments for individuals with autism. Prisons are required, within law, to make anticipatory reasonable adjustments

in relation to individuals with autism, ensuring that they are not put at a substantial disadvantage, and prison is no worse for them for reasons relating to their disability. Failure to do so will be a breach of the law.

Sections 20 and 21 of The Equality Act 2010, set out the 'duty to make reasonable adjustments', which obliges duty-bearers to take reasonable steps to remove barriers that would otherwise cause a disabled person to be at a substantial disadvantage compared to people who are not disabled. The duty is imposed on providers of public functions by virtue of s 29(7). Public functions are required to balance what is considered 'reasonable' in relation to cost, practicality, and in-line with the size and proportion of the prison, as well as how effective it would be in removing 'substantial disadvantage' for disabled people (The Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). If the adjustment is not considered 'reasonable' by the establishment, they must endeavour to take other steps to reduce the disadvantage whilst also ensuring the disabled person is informed in an accessible way.

Section 29(7)(b) of the Equality Act 2010 states that a person who exercises a public function is subject to a duty to make reasonable adjustments. This concludes that all prisons, whether public or private, have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled people are not put at a substantial disadvantage, compared to their non-disabled peers.

There are two types of reasonable adjustment duty: anticipatory and reactive. The latter refers to a service making reasonable adjustments once they are aware an individual is disabled. This type of duty operates in connection with employment, with employers providing adjustments once they are aware that an individual may be at a substantial disadvantage (House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disability, 2016). The anticipatory duty requires organisations to consider and take reasonable steps to remove any barriers which potentially could cause a disabled individual to be placed at a substantial disadvantage, prior to them accessing the service. These adjustments should be continually reviewed (Lawson and Orchard, 2021) ensuring effectiveness is still present. The reasonable adjustments duty imposed by The Equality Act 2010 on providers of public functions is anticipatory, in this sense. This would require prisons to identify potential barriers to inclusion and take anticipatory steps to reduce substantial disadvantage for disabled prisoners.

### 2.5.3 Accommodations and adjustments to education within prisons

Previously, McCulloch (2012) conducted a study based on individuals in prison with a hearing impairment. He stated that many participants felt that there was a lack of adjustments made to the

education provision to enable them to be fully included. He gave an example of one participant who had joined an offender management course but was unable to access it due to no adjustments made to enable total communication. This resulted in him being unable to hear and obtain invaluable information. Similar barriers may also be present for individuals with autism, who may also need the delivery of communication to be considered. If such considerations are not made, with adjustments and accommodations implemented, it could leave individuals with autism being excluded further, unable to 'prove' rehabilitation but for reasons relating to their condition – suggesting discrimination would have occurred.

Slater et al (2022) examined prison education from the perspective of sex offenders. They emphasized the need for adjustments to be made to the educational programmes on offer to ensure they were accessible and relevant, enabling individuals to be motivated to learn, supporting a successful rehabilitation. Slater et al (2022) also called for prisons to address the stigma attached to marginalised groups, such as those labelled as a sex offender, and the barriers this creates for them in accessing educational programmes. Although this study did not include individuals with autism, the adjustments discussed in relation to the prison's educational opportunities and accessibility, would also benefit such people. To ensure accessible education is delivered, it may require specialist training for staff, individualised person-centred plans as well as flexibility with timetables (The Education Committee, 2022a). For some prison governors, this may result in added costs or pressure on staff, as additional training courses may need to be delivered. This could impact their motivation and acceptance in supporting such adaptations and demonstrating good practice.

Previous legal cases have also proven that more needs to be done to ensure the rights of disabled people. In the case of R. (on the application of Gill) v Secretary of State for Justice (2012), a judge ruled that unlawful discrimination had occurred at one prison as they failed to make reasonable adjustments to their educational and rehabilitation programmes to meet the needs of one individual with learning difficulties. The parole board in this case recommended that offender management programmes were to be undertaken by the individual to reduce the risk of reoffending. However, the prison service stated that anybody with an IQ less than 80 would be unable to successfully access them, excluding the individual in question, and many others. In this case, adjustments were not made to ensure equal opportunities, as outlined previously in anti-discrimination laws. Adjustments to the resources available, time limits, delivery of information, additional support, as well as processing time all need to be

considered if individuals with autism are to have equal opportunities to fully participate in all aspects of the education regime.

In their report, The Education Committee (2022a) does recognise the current barriers to prison education for individuals with autism and people with learning difficulties, calling for an entire system approach. The report states that adjustments to the initial educational screening of all prisoners needs to be consistent, allowing prisons to quickly identify individuals with autism and develop an appropriate educational pathway of support. The report also called for personalised learning plans, which accommodates for individual needs, providing necessary resources to enable learning to take place. Examining this through a social model lens, the Education Committee (2022a) does appear to be taking steps to reduce the social barriers individuals with autism face, however, with prison governors having more choice and control over the educational opportunities available within their establishments, as well as the lack of a reliable and universal educational screening tool for prisons, such recommendations from the Committee can only be implemented to an extent.

### 2.5.4 The Prison environment

Many prison buildings within the UK date back to the Victorian era often with cold and small cells, unpleasant brick walls and minimal natural light. Physical aspects of the 'old style' buildings could present challenges for individuals with autism, especially those who may also experience sensory sensitivities, such as bright unnatural light, loud bangs, unwanted physical touch as well as a lack of control over food (APPGA, 2019; Higgs and Carter, 2015; McAdam, 2012; Robertson and McGillivray, 2015; Vinter et al, 2020). Sensory sensitivities have been prominent in many studies, including the APPGA (2019) who concluded that the prison environments can often be overwhelming for individuals with autism, especially with the many loud noises present and bright lights. Vinter et al (2020) reports similar findings, suggesting that many of their participants found the noise of prisons challenging and recommended quieter areas which individuals with autism could retreat to. This was also echoed in Allely and Woods (2022) study, where one of their participants also highlighted how the noise of the banging of cell doors, alarms and the movement of keys all contributed to his anxiety and distress. As Allely and Wood (2022) emphasize, loud noises can be extremely intense for individuals with autism, and in some cases almost painful. Therefore, making small accommodations, such as quieter spaces, preparing individuals for planned alarms or providing ear defenders when appropriate, can promote good practice, as well as contribute to a decrease in stress and anxiety.

Bright and unnatural lighting may also cause individuals with autism distress (Higgs and Carter, 2015) especially when they are unable to hide away from it due to certain rules being implemented. Although window curtains are permitted, obtaining them may be a struggle as they are dependent on prison budgets and not seen as a priority (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). Throughout government policies, there is a great focus on ensuring enough natural light is provided in all prison cells (MOJ and HMPSS, 2023) however, it appears that the consequences of this, for individuals with autism, has not been considered. Being allocated curtains or blinds, residing on a wing where lighting is dimmed as well as consideration being taken around the lighting in educational classrooms and workshops, may all support the sensory sensitivities of individuals with autism. However, this is on a 'need bases', and not all individuals would benefit from more/less natural light, therefore having prison staff who are aware of individual needs can significantly contribute towards positive outcomes.

Overcrowding within prisons is a major concern for the MOJ (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2022) which results in many individuals sharing a small cell which was not originally designed for two people. HM inspectorate of Prisons (2017) highlights how prison cells are to be considered the 'homes' of individuals, as it is where they store their belongings, where they reside at night and where they may choose to go to 'shut off' from the world and enjoy some private time. With individuals with autism, typically experiencing difficulties with social communication and interaction, sharing a cell with an unfamiliar individual may present challenges. Although prisons may not have the option to accommodate single cells, due to overcrowding, accommodations should be made wherever possible, as this would promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism, as well as decrease stress and anxiety levels.

### 2.5.5 Rules and regimes

In a world that can be unpredictable, providing structure and routine to individuals with autism can produce a sense of calmness and relieve anxieties (McAdam, 2012; NAS, 2024c; Vinter and Dillon, 2023). Prisons are known to adopt and enforce specific rules and routines, which in some cases, can provide comfort and consistency for individuals with autism (Vinter et al, 2020). However, when such routines are broken, altered, or changed completely, often without prior knowledge, this can cause disruption, stress, and frustration to an individual's day (Vinter et al, 2020). Vinter and Dillon (2023) advocate for more explanations, check-ins and conversations around routine changes and the reasons for them, allowing individuals with autism the opportunity to ask questions and understand. Yet, on occasions, individuals with autism may disrupt the running of the daily routine for themselves and others,

sometimes for reasons relating to their disability and inability to effectively have their needs and desires understood. This is almost like a catch 22, as the desire to abide by the routine may present challenges, which results in a breakdown in communication and perceived challenging behaviours being displayed, therefore further changes to the routine being implemented, often not only for the individual, but for others on the wing too. This has previously been demonstrated in Paterson's (2008) study, where he highlighted how the behaviour of one individual with autism, who had difficulties communicating his needs verbally, then resulted in perceived challenging behaviours being displayed, which directly impacted other individuals with autism as a lockdown was implemented.

Despite this, there may still be a need for some flexibility to the daily routine and structure for individuals with autism. Consideration of their individual needs may be required if positive outcomes are to be achieved. Again, referring to Paterson's (2008) study, he discusses how one individual with autism was permitted to eat his lunch in his cell alone, due to his anxieties around being bullied and victimised by others. Paterson (2008) reports how the prison then saw a decrease in aggressive altercations with others. Although this may be perceived as a positive outcome, taking a social model perspective, adaptations such as this can isolate individuals with autism, rather than support a more inclusive, aware, and knowledgeable prison society. Such adjustments should be considered on a day-to-day basis when individuals with autism may be experiencing a 'bad day' or just need quiet time away from others.

As well as flexibility to the daily routine, considerations should also be made to prison policies, such as the behaviour policy. Communication and interaction have already been highlighted as presenting difficulties for individuals with autism, therefore recognising and understanding that 'behaviour is a form of communication', especially when some individuals may use inappropriate language to express themselves, may support a calmer environment, which caters for individual needs. This has been highlighted by the NAS (2022) which discusses how having trained staff, who can recognise that often aggression and perceived challenging behaviours are not always disobedient. This then allows adjustments to the policies and rules to be made, supporting positive outcomes, rather than further punishment.

### 2.5.6 Specialist wings

The desire to introduce specialist wings to support the needs of individuals with autism has been recommended for many years (Allely, 2015; Woodbury-Smith and Dein, 2014), suggesting that such wings can promote positive outcomes. NHS England and NHS Improvement (2021) referred to the 'Mulberry Unit' at HMP Wakefield, a wing designed to support individuals with autism, stating that

intensive interventions are provided to enhance their social interaction skills and help prepare them for life upon release back into the community. NHS England and NHS Improvement (2021) discuss how this specialist wing is not designed to permanently house individuals with autism but instead acts more of a 'alternative provision' for a period, as the aim is always to re-integrate back into the main prison population.

In their report, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020:6) discuss how HMP Parc also provide specialist support for individuals with autism, providing "bespoke services" to create positive outcomes. They discuss how the 'Cynnwys unit' provides specialist support for individuals with autism, with whom reside there full-time. The introduction of 'learning disability nurses' as well as in-depth assessments by knowledgeable and trained staff, creates an environment which caters for the needs of individuals with autism. Both HMP Wakefield and HMP Parc have worked alongside the NAS, and both obtained Autism Accreditation Status, displaying their dedication to producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. However, the need to isolate and segregate to provide good quality support is questionable and does not appear to promote a social model perspective.

## 2.6 COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the government declared COVID-19 a global pandemic due to transmission rates worldwide, with the virus at the time, directly affecting individuals across the UK. With restrictions confiding people to their homes, socialisation prohibited, and many services closed, individuals were forced to give up their freedom 'for the greater good'. These safety measures directly impacted my fieldwork which was halted, and when interviewing did recommence, additional safety precautions were implemented. These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. For those in prison, whose freedoms are already limited, further restrictions were quickly implemented to reduce the risk of transmission (Prison Reform Trust, 2020). However, initially limited guidance was published to support and direct prisons through an unprecedented time, when staffing levels were at an all-time low.

### 2.6.1 COVID-19 and prisons

For individuals in prison, who live closely together in restricted spaces, the WHO (2021) stressed the immediate requirement for preventative measures to be implemented to reduce transmission rates. The biggest safety measure was the introduction of 22-hour lockdowns, minimising interactions. Edge et al (2021) argues that this quick response was positive and most likely saved lives. Many reports and studies published since COVID-19 have all suggested an increase in poor mental health (Prison Reform Trust, 2021), a decline in prisoner-family relationships, including the involvement of children (Suleman et al,

2021), increase in boredom and loneliness as well as many individuals being released back into the community without the necessary tools to be successful (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b). This highlights that the significant need to potentially protect and save lives, has had serious implications for individuals who experienced COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in prison.

Prisons are well known environments for infectious diseases, due to overcrowding (Council of Europe, 2022) and the limited health services readily available within such establishments (Edge et al, 2021). As part of the government's response to COVID-19, the 'Hands. Face. Space' campaign in 2020 was introduced in the hope of reducing the spread of the virus. However, within their study, Suhomlinova et al (2021) discovered that many participants residing in several prisons across the UK reported that hand washing, and hygiene facilities were not readily available, including hand sanitizer. Suhomlinova et al (2021) also reports how even though face masks were mandatory within the community from July 2020, within prisons they were slow to transpire, with HMPPS (2020) not commissioning this to be mandatory in prisons until November 2020. Although the government initially appeared to implement quick preventative measures to protect all individuals in prison, the lack of available PPE and other safety equipment placed individuals in prison at greater risk of contracting the virus, and spreading it (Suhomlinova et al, 2021).

As well as a decline in physical health, Suhomlinova et al (2021) reports a significant decline in individuals mental health due to an increase in boredom and loneliness. In their study, participants reported an increase in self-harm and suicidal thoughts (Suhomlinova et al, 2021) and with minimal healthcare services available, many individuals were left without guidance and support (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). However, Edge et al (2021) reports the opposite, stating that self-harm and suicide decreased during COVID-19, suggesting this may be due to factors relating to minimal social interaction therefore fewer incidents of bullying and violence. Nevertheless, what cannot be denied is that prolonged lockdowns with minimal stimulation and activities will have affected an individual's mental well-being, but to what extent is unknown and personal to each individual.

### 2.6.2 The effects of COVID-19 on individuals with autism

Only a handful of studies were discovered that investigated the pandemic and autism (Davison et al, 2020; NAS, 2020; Pais and Knapp, 2021; Spain et al, 2021). Most of these do not directly involve individuals with autism, nor do they highlight their unique stories told in their own voices. Instead, a large percentage seek the views of carers, families and professionals supporting such individuals through an unprecedented time. To my knowledge, three studies were successful in sourcing the views of

individuals with autism who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which were obtained via online surveys (Davidson et al, 2020; NAS, 2020; Spain et al, 2021). COVID-19 brought about significant and immediate changes to the lives of everybody, all around the world, however, for individuals with autism, whose lives can often revolve around routine these changes left many confused, anxious and stressed (Spain et al, 2021).

Findings from the NAS (2020) highlight how a significant number of individuals with autism reported an increase in isolation and loneliness. Although it is reported that individuals with autism can find social interaction and communication challenging (Allely and Wood, 2022; Lewis et al, 2015; NAS, 2020; Vinter et al 2020), this does not always mean that the desire to form meaningful relationships is not present (Crompton et al, 2020), therefore a sense of loneliness can still be felt, especially during times when interaction is prohibited. The NAS (2020) also discusses how the closure of services, such as residential care, mental health support and education, all drastically impacted individual's mental health and well-being. Consequently, many families found themselves unable to manage and support loved ones, due to unpredictable behaviours, which were intensified. An increase in perceived challenging behaviours was not uncommon during the pandemic (NAS, 2020; Pais and Knapp, 2021) with the NAS (2020) reporting that this was linked to a lack of understanding by individuals with autism, caused by inaccessible information. The NAS (2020) uses an example of an individual with autism having their temperature taken with a 'thermometer gun' prior to entering a supermarket. The lack of awareness of the usage of such tools due to inaccessible information, resulted in one individual with autism finding the experience challenging and became dysregulated. Such experiences can have significant effects on an individual's emotional and mental well-being, reducing their confidence accessing their community when necessary.

Davidson et al (2020) reported similar conclusions. Their study, although very selective and only involved individuals with autism with who were registered with the Leeds diagnostic autism team, did obtain the direct experiences of individuals with autism. As with the NAS (2020) findings, Davidson et al (2020) also highlights how many individuals made reports of isolation and loneliness throughout COVID-19, as they were also unable to seek interaction and support from their loved ones. However, Davidson et al (2020) does discover that not all individuals with autism found COVID-19 to be damaging towards their social interaction, some participants stated that they felt less stressed as the pressure of social communication and interaction was removed. Additionally, routines were also discussed, with some participants highlighting how initially adapting to a new routine was challenging, however, they now feel more comfortable that a new one has been established. What was not discussed but may be suggested

as difficult, is the reintegration and transition back to 'the new norm' once COVID-19 had been appropriately managed. For participants who stated that they were happy about the decrease in social interaction as well as their new routine which involved isolation, with minimal community access, concerns could be raised about their ability to cope with transitioning back into society and the increased risk of them becoming further socially isolated.

Spain et al (2021) conducted research on health and social care professionals who work and support individuals with autism. They discovered that many felt that the major disruption caused by COVID-19 had resulted in a significant backlog of referrals and continued support for individuals with autism, especially those who found online or virtual appointments challenging (Spain et al, 2021). There were no reports on strategies on how to help combat this barrier, but instead just recognition that this caused a significant decrease in the mental and emotional well-being of individuals with autism, especially if they had continued difficulties in identifying and expressing their emotions. This was a reflection of Davidsons et al (2020) study, who had previously reported how 72% of their participants felt their mental health had declined during COVID-19 and although some found new coping strategies, such as building a new routine, participating in new hobbies such as gardening, baking or crafting, without additional support, a decline in mental health was present.

### 2.6.3 The effects of COVID-19 on individuals with autism, in prison

Knowledge of the effects of COVID-19 on individuals with autism in prisons is limited, with extensive searches unsuccessful in identifying any research focusing on such experiences. The voices of a small percentage of individuals with autism has been obtained and showcased in some studies, however, overall, many studies that solely focus on the experiences of such a marginalised group are absent. After extensive research searches, The Howard League for Penal Reform (2020) is the only study discovered that includes the voice of one individual with autism, residing in prison, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study does not highlight its inclusion of individuals with autism; however, it is evident they were included but their voices not displayed or heard accordingly.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter began by exploring the purpose of prisons and how individuals with autism fit into a regime that is designed to punish those convicted of committing crimes. As individuals with autism are often labelled as 'vulnerable' therefore in need of 'protection', it can present challenges for prisons whose primary purpose is to provide protection for society, from such individuals when they have committed crimes. This chapter explored how prisons can successfully punish individuals, whilst still encouraging

them to rehabilitate. As with the prison within this study, segregation is sometimes called for, claiming that personalised, bespoke, and individualised support can be offered, which can in-turn enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The need to segregate to obtain support does not support a social model approach, and instead suggests barriers are present due to individual and personal difficulties. If positive outcomes are to be achieved, then a whole system approach, as recommended by The Education Committee (2022a) needs to be implemented to ensure the environmental, attitudinal, institutional, and social barriers are removed.

There is no doubt that education plays a significant role in contributing towards a successful rehabilitation, however, what is defined by 'success' can differ. The MOJ are passionate about individuals in prison obtaining a basic level of education, so they can learn new skills which they believe can increase their chances of gaining employment upon release (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a; MOJ, 2021, 2018). They link a successful rehabilitation directly to education; however, it appears as though this is offered on a 'one size fit all' basis. This is something which may not support the needs of individuals with autism, especially those who may have a negative education experience due to not having their needs met in school. Additionally, factors such as brightness of the learning space, classroom size, differentiated resources, or number of people present, may have a direct impact on the success of individuals with autism due to their sensory sensitivities and common difficulties with social communication and interaction. Although legislation has previously called for services and support to be accessible and delivered by skilled staff (The Equality Act, 2010), research suggests that for individuals with autism in prison, this is not readily available (House of Commons and Education Committee 2022b). Without a 'successful' education, the MOJ believe that individuals are at a greater risk of reoffending (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022). Furthermore, success is measured by the academic accomplishments whilst in prison, which can contribute towards obtaining employment upon release (MOJ, 2021; House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a) as well as participation in offender management courses. However, for individuals with autism, measuring success by such achievements may put them at a disadvantage, especially if their cognitive abilities restrict them from obtaining academic qualifications or reasonable adjustments are not implemented to ensure accessibility. Education may not be an individual's primary purpose, but obtaining support for their health needs, or forming meaningful relationships with staff or other prisoners may be more beneficial and meet their needs accordingly, especially if they are unable to obtain employment upon release anyway. Nevertheless, all forms of education, including purposeful activity, is a vital component in the rehabilitative journeys of individuals within prison, including those

with autism, however, consideration of needs is required if adaptations are to be implemented to enable success.

Adjustments, accommodations, and promotion of good practice is also required across the whole prison, if individuals with autism are to be successful. Research suggests that there is a vast majority of approaches for supporting individuals with autism in prison across the UK, with some prisons opening specialist wings, operating differently, with trained and skilled staff offering daily support. This could suggest that not one single approach has been identified as the most effective in supporting individuals with autism in prison to 'successfully rehabilitate' in-line with the MOJ expectations and standards.

As discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, this thesis was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus halted my research and ultimately, affected the data obtained during the second visit. The long-term effects of COVID-19 will be unknown for some time, however, for individuals in prison who experienced their sentenced during this unprecedented time, research suggests an already increase in poor mental health (Prison Reform Trust, 2021), a decline in positive relationships with families (Suleman et al, 2021) as well as many individuals being released back into the community without, what the MOJ believe to be, the necessary tools to be successful (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b). This highlights the significant need to protect and save lives, however, it may have come at the expense of rehabilitation, which could result in re-offending. The lack of stimulation and increased loneliness and boredom, with individuals being confined to their cells for around 22 hours per day, Suhomlinova et al (2020:293) describes it as "a prison within a prison". Those whose liberty was already lost, appear to have lost it further, with little consideration of the impact this would have on their chances of rehabilitating.

What has been evident throughout this literature review, is the lack of research that includes individuals with autism, especially those in prison. The lack of research displaying the voices and experiences of such a marginalised group, especially during COVID-19, could lead to policy makers and prison staff being unaware and unable to meet individual needs. Additionally, within legislation, policies and guidance which directly affects prisons, often couple autism with other conditions (Lewis et al, 2015) or do not refer to such individuals at all. This can not only lead to confusion when attempting to successfully meet individual needs but also suggests a 'lesser' importance of the condition. This raise concerns as to the priorities of HMPPS and the MOJ in terms of supporting such a marginalised group, enabling them to be successful. This study seeks to fill these knowledge gaps.

# 3. Chapter Three: Methods

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore why qualitative research methods, in the form of semi-structured interviews were the preferred approach to explore the views of individuals with autism, serving a sentence in a UK prison applying for the NAS' Autism Accreditation Programme. Considering the specific needs of individuals with autism, this approach allowed for a greater in-depth understanding of their experiences, gathered using a variety of resources. The applicability of realist evaluation, guided by Kazi's (1999) Realist Effectiveness Cycle, is examined in greater detail within this chapter. Using this theory; what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why, this raw data can be explored in-depth. The methodology, study design, limitations, analysis methods and ethical considerations are all fundamental within this chapter. This research is underpinned by the Social Model of Disability, focusing on the structural, attitudinal, and environmental barriers which may restrict or enhance success for individuals with autism serving a prison sentence in one UK prison, applying for Accreditation.

As stated in Chapter Two, current research exploring the views and experiences of individuals with autism in prison is extremely limited, even more so when such individuals reside in a prison applying for the NAS Autism Accreditation Programme. To successfully gain a greater understanding of the NAS' Autism Accreditation Programme, Prison Standards, and how these are implemented in one prison within the UK, this study was devised into two Phases. Phase One consisted of semi-structured interviews with the 'programme architects'; individuals from the NAS which helps design and implement the prison standards. The interviews allowed a deeper understanding of how the NAS works alongside prisons to promote an 'autism friendly' environment, as well as their guidance on how to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The scoping study, detailed and analysed in chapter four of this thesis, helped shape the main methodological approach, theory, and hypothesis of this study. Reoccurring themes, conclusions and common expectations were extracted from Phase One, allowing them to be 'tested' and explore further in Phase Two.

## 3.2 The Researcher's Background

For nearly thirty years, I have had a passion for gaining positive outcomes for individuals with autism, providing effective and person-centred support to in a personal role, as well as professional. When my young brother was diagnosed with autism at just two years old, our lives drastically changed, constantly fighting professionals and services to obtain the support he required and was entitled to. Having to learn

to adapt my communication style, become more aware of my surroundings and the impact this may have in relation to his sensory needs, as well as recognising the lack of awareness and acceptance amongst society, was challenging as a young girl. However, this instilled in me a hunger to make positive change to ensure the rights and needs of individuals with autism did not go unnoticed. This drive was apparent in my educational journey; with my Undergraduate Degree in 'Learning Disability Studies', my MA in 'Critical Disability Studies' and now a Doctorate in a similar field. My educational journey has enhanced my knowledge and skills, allowing me to continue to fight for the rights of my brother and others with autism.

Alongside my continuous education, my professional experience has also increased my knowledge and skills, allowing me to better support individuals with autism. Working in a mainstream high school, my role as Assistant Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator and Autism Spectrum Condition lead, has allowed me to introduce a 'Autism Friendly Room' where individuals with autism can retreat to when the pressure of mainstream life becomes overwhelming. Offering them sensory input, mentoring and guidance as well as adjustments to the educational opportunities available, this safe space allows young people to obtain appropriate support whilst still accessing mainstream education. My drive to support individuals with autism to live fulfilling lives, free from discrimination has always encouraged me to promote autism acceptance both within my role and within my community. I have hosted many unique events, all celebrating autism, bringing families, communities, and young people together whilst raising awareness and understanding of such an important cause.

My personal, educational, and professional experience has provided me with the confidence and ability to converse with individuals appropriately and quickly with autism, putting them at ease. I can quickly adapt my communication style; use simple and clear language, incorporate 'banter' or change the speed of my voice to ensure understanding and processing. My ability to do this successfully, was evident throughout this thesis, as all participants, especially individuals with autism, felt comfortable within my presence, having only met me that day. They felt confident enough to open up, and discuss personal issues, demonstrating a sense of familiarity, reassurance, and comfort, allowing for a raw and rich data collection.

## 3.3 Phase One – Theory Building

### 3.3.1 Purpose and Rationale

This Phase involved deepening my understanding and knowledge of the expectations, desired outcomes, and the approaches to change the NAS has in relation to prisons applying for Accreditation status. Examining the NAS Prison Standards and then speaking directly to individuals whose roles are key in the execution of them, was vital in gaining a greater insight into whether the desired outcomes were achieved as well as discovering what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why. This phase took place in May 2018, when the standards were being piloted across three prisons within the UK. Phase Two of this study was conducted in one of those prisons. Since then, the government has recommended and supported the introduction of more UK prisons joining the programme and working towards obtaining better outcomes for individuals with autism (NHS England, 2021).

With the introduction of the prison standards, the NAS hopes for better outcomes for individuals with autism in prison. These standards act as guidance and support on how prisons can implement changes and adaptations to provide effective support that caters for individual needs. Most research in this field does not engage with individuals with autism in prison, with even fewer studies committed to gaining the views and experience of such individuals. What we know about their experiences is usually based on the accounts of professionals of family members or professionals, speaking on their behalf. This study aimed to engage with individuals with autism in prison. However, initially it was thought vital that interviews with the 'programme architects' were conducted. This was to ensure my understanding of what is expected from the prison was clear. Reoccurring themes, interesting topics and core aims then helped build a 'programme theories' which were to be 'tested' and explored further in Phase Two.

### 3.3.2 Programme Architects

Both participants within this Phase were instrumental in the designing, developing, and evaluating the NAS Autism Accreditation Programme for Prison. Both participant names have been changed for confidentiality purposes. Participant One; Barney, was introduced to me by Participant Two; Annie, whom I met at a conference. Annie has worked with the NAS for over 20 years, using her passion, drive, and knowledge to campaign for better outcomes for individuals with autism in the justice system. Barney is an advisor, who discussed his role in supporting and evaluating prisons on their progress for providing a more 'autism friendly' environment. Both Annie and Barney expressed their desires to take part in this study due to this area being significantly under researched. The decision to interview two individuals was to gain a greater insight into their perceptions and core aims for the standards. It also

allowed me to compare and contrast data, exploring whether both had similar desired outcomes for individuals with autism. Such information then helped shape the programme theory and hypothesis for Phase Two of this study. Both participants are in great support of my research and were instrumental in helping me build connections within Prison AA, who participated in this study.

### 3.3.3 Data collection methods and approach to analysis

Phase One did not involve the collection of data from prisons; therefore 'Light touch' ethical approval was applied for via the University of Leeds. Initial contact with both participants in Phase One was at an 'Autism and Criminal Justice' conference in Manchester. Personal details were shared, and we stayed connected via email. As this was the preferred method of communication for both participants, all information sheets, interview protocols, consent forms as well as scheduling of interviews, was communicated securely this way. Both semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype, three days apart, due to physical location as well as time constraints. The views and wishes of the participants were paramount (Bell, 2014) as I wanted to ensure minimal disruption to their working day. Both interviews were informal, with conversations around personal life happening prior to the interview commencing. To ensure confidentiality was maintained, I conducted the interviews at home, in my study, minimising other individuals hearing the participant's responses. Both interviews lasted an hour each, with written consent obtained prior. Interviews were later transcribed and analysed using coding. NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, was initially used, however, due to my preference of handwriting and colour-coding my data, this approach was adopted instead. Alongside a literature review; demonstrated in Chapter Two of this thesis, an in-depth document analysis took place of the NAS' Prison Standards. This method of gathering information and knowledge was seen as a critical in the initial stages, as it allowed me to gain an insight into the aims and expectations the NAS place on prisons who are dedicated to working towards Accreditation status.

### 3.3.4 Re-occurring themes to be 'tested' in Phase Two

Taking a realist evaluation approach to analysing the data from Phase One, numerous C-M-O's were identified. These were collated into common themes to be explored and 'tested' in Phase Two. These include:

- Training and the impact of this, for the prison staff community.
- Educational and rehabilitation courses.
- Reasonable adjustments, adaptations, and good practice, including awareness of the physical environment and sensory sensitivities.

- Accessible information and collaborative working across services, such as education, healthcare, and parole boards.
- Support to cope with the pressures and stress of everyday prison life.
- Building and maintaining relationships

## 3.4 Phase Two – Theory Testing

### 3.4.1 Inclusive Research

Oliver (1992) asserted that previous research around disability has been controlled and owned by non-disabled people, often alienating disabled people. Ultimately, meaning that the 'subjects' have little or no ownership, and lack control, of the research. This can create a power imbalance between the researcher and the researched (Barnes and Mercer, 2004) often with very few positive impacts for disabled people. Great emphasis has been placed on the inclusion of disabled people throughout the research process (Walmsley et al, 2018), with guiding principles generally indicating that all individuals should have control within the decision making, delegating of tasks, recording and analysing data as well as developing ideas for the initial research topic (Walmsley et al, 2018). More specifically, extensive searches discovered that there have been no studies conducted alongside individuals with autism, who are serving a prison sentence in a UK prison.

This study is centred around the NAS Autism Accreditation Prison Standards, and the expectations outlined for prisons to adhere to in order to produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism. As stated previously, although the standards are implemented with the aim of promoting positive outcomes for individuals with autism, such people were not included in the design process. This does raise questions as to whether the standards could be further developed if individuals with autism were included and their opinions on how best to meet their needs incorporated. However, this criticism could also be extended to this thesis, as I was unable to completely conform to an inclusive approach due to the University of Leeds requirements. I had to stay in control and always take ownership of the research. Nonetheless, the desire to create a positive change for a marginalised group of individuals in prison, drove me to incorporate some aspects of inclusive research including accessible interviews, appropriate communication and interaction skills as well as flexibility, allowing participants to steer questions and responses in their own direction. This is discussed in greater detail in 3.4.2 of this chapter.

### 3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Due to this research taking place within a prison, with individuals considered as 'vulnerable', numerous ethical considerations were explored. This research also ensured that the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice 2017, University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy 2015 and numerous Prison Service Instructions, were considered and adhered to. This project underwent ethical review through not only Leeds University, but also HMPPS. This process involved a detailed application form, explaining the importance of my research as well as the benefits to academic knowledge and HMPPS. Included within this application was details on my planned timeline, sampling aims as well as my request to bring in a recording device. Considerations to the participants needs, the environment as well as the equipment required to successfully record interviews were all outlined in detail in the application, which was granted approval in 2018.

#### *3.4.2.1 Informed consent*

All individuals with autism who participated in this study volunteered to take part. Three months prior to interviews commencing, information sheets and consent forms were provided, via email, to the prisons. Emails were exchanged between the Wing Manager and I, discussing how familiar and trusted prison staff would be able to support individuals with autism to read, sign and return the consent forms. Information sheets included reasons for the study, why participants were being asked to take part, as well as the process of the interviews. Participants were also informed that there would be no gifts and that staff who also participated would be asked questions about them. Participants were chosen and consent was gained by prison staff, creating a sense of bias, however, this was unavoidable.

To ensure true informed consent was obtained, information sheets and consent forms were devised in both original and easy-read formats and distributed together to avoid upset or offense. The easy-read information sheet included a significant reduction in words, ensuring information overload was not present, as well as visual aids to support individuals understanding of certain words. Although this version appeared longer, with more pages, this was due to the presentation of information, with font size being larger with more spacing between words, again reducing the risk of information overload. The consent form followed a similar format, using plain language and visuals to support understanding. Once consent forms were obtained, they were stored securely on the University of Leeds 'M Drive'. Prior to interviews commencing, verbal consent was obtained by myself. This allowed me to gain a greater understanding of participants knowledge of what was expected of them for the duration of the research, and that they felt comfortable participating. This was achieved by using appropriate language,

which was understood by the participants, as well as allowing processing time to respond. This was the process followed for both visits to the prison.

Obtaining consent from members of staff followed a similar protocol, with information sheets and consent forms being sent to them prior to both visits. These were also returned electronically, once signed. Verbal consent was obtained prior to any interview commencing.

All participants were advised prior to any interviews taking place, and through information sheets, that any disclosure relating to an intention to self-harm or hurt others, an intention to break out of prison or any unreported offences, I am obliged under the Prison Rules 1999, to inform the appropriate people. Apart from this, all participants were informed that all other conversations will be confidential, with their names anonymised.

#### *3.4.2.2 Anonymity and confidentiality*

As this research was undertaken with the approval of the NAS, they are aware of the Prison in which the study was conducted, however throughout the thesis, its name, including those of all participants involved, has been changed. To ensure that all participants identities are anonymised, the following steps were taken:

1. Prior to any interview, arrangements were made to ensure that a suitable private room was available throughout the duration of the visit. This room was on the wing, reducing movement for individuals with autism, as well as being familiar to them, allowing a sense of comfortableness within their environment. The glass on the windows was also one-way glass, resulting in participants being able to see out, but those walking past were unable to see inside, creating a sense of privacy
2. All participants had the right to withdraw until three months after their interview. At this point, their data would have been removed from the study and destroyed. This was made clear to all participants both in written form and verbally, prior to interviews commencing.
3. The name of the prison involved is anonymised. Any identifiable information discussed during interviews was taken out and not included within the analysis. Participants were also informed that their names would not be passed on to any other governing body and that this study is completely independent.

#### *3.4.2.3 Sensitive research with 'vulnerable' populations in prison*

It can be argued that all individuals in prison are considered to be 'vulnerable' as their reliance to have their basic needs met is on the state (Charles et al, 2014). When an individual has autism, some have argued that it adds another layer of 'vulnerability' for reasons relating to their autism (Allely, 2015) such as social communication and interaction difficulties, sensory sensitivities, and rigidity of thought. Based on the above perceptions, it could be argued that individuals with autism in prison would be deemed as 'highly vulnerable', falling into two categories of vulnerability. Due to this perceived vulnerability, individuals in prison, including those with autism, have frequently been restricted from participation in research (Charles et al, 2014) as there is a desire to protect them. It was imperative that individuals with autism were included within this study, and future studies, with their voices and experiences heard, especially given that such as marginalised group is often overlooked with professionals and carers making suggestions on how best to meet their individual needs.

The aim and focus of this study was to explore the adaptations and changes implemented from the Prison Standards, to examine what works for whom, under what circumstances and why. Sensitive topics, such as their offences, backgrounds and friends and family circumstances, although important, were not included within the interview protocol. Sensitive topics such as this were discussed during the interviews, however, at the participants discretion. My expertise in appropriately and effectively conversing with individuals with autism, as well as my 'common as muck' personality, described by one of the participants within this study, allowed all participants to quickly feel comfortable within my presence, creating a safe environment where they were able to open up, express their views and share their experiences.

#### *3.4.2.4 COVID-19 Pandemic*

The global pandemic was a factor which could not be planned for within this study, however data obtained was affected by this. Fieldwork was halted for over a year, due to a period of maternity leave and then COVID lockdowns. With the government limiting movement, requesting individuals to 'stay at home', even close family and friend's visits were suspended for individuals in prison. Upon the first easing of restrictions in 2021, ethical approval was granted to revisit Prison AA. To obtain ethical approval, extensive perusing of application forms, emails and consent occurred over two months. These specified the benefits to HMPPS and the wider research community, the need for a recording device, the importance of the continuation of this research with individuals with autism, as well as additional considerations taken to continue to reduce the spread of the virus, all in detail.

To ensure safety, during the second visit to the Prison, in September 2021, national guidelines were followed which included the use of face coverings, social distancing, regular washing of hands and two negative lateral flow tests from myself, prior to interviews commencing. Interviews commenced in the same room as the previous visit, however participants sat further away to reduce the risk of the virus spreading. Additionally, writing materials, such as pens, pencils and paper were provided by the prison, again reducing the risk of the virus spreading. During interviews, face coverings were optional for all participants, considering their sensory needs. I also enquired on their preference for me to wear a face covering, again considering their needs. All participants wished for interviews to commence with no face coverings. As a safe distance was imposed, all individuals were safe to remove them.

#### *3.4.2.5 Safety*

To ensure that participants and I were always safe, the following procedures took place:

1. A member of staff escorted the participants to and from the pre-arranged familiar private room.
2. All policies and procedures relating to safety and security were followed thoroughly, with vital information being shared upon arrival, such as any planned fire drills or disturbances on the wing resulting in lockdown.
3. The use of my expertise and experience working with individuals with autism was drawn upon throughout, ensuring that language, tone of voice and effective communication was used throughout. If participants presented signs of agitation, I was able to quickly divert the conversation, however, knew I could also alert a member of staff quickly if required.

## 3.5 Data Collection Methods

### 3.5.1 Sample

Phase Two involved the gathering of information and data from individuals with autism, as well as members of staff who support them daily. The purpose was to obtain their views and experiences on whether the desired outcomes of the Prison Standards had been successful. The prison involved is a category B prison and accommodates around 1700 individuals, which has steadily increased in capacity over the years. This study included participants from a white British background. This was not intentional, however, occurred due to the number of prisoners present who were willing to participate, and who matched the criteria. I experienced two visits to the prison. The first visit took place in March 2019, where three individuals with autism were interviewed, along with one member of staff who

supported them daily: a key worker. A second member of staff was also interviewed a week later, via Skype, due to their absence on the day of the visit. My second visit took place in September 2021, over two years later! The delay in these interviews was due to taking maternity leave and then the COVID-19 pandemic. During visit two, five more individuals with autism were interviewed, along with a group interview involving three staff members, two of which were staff interviewed on my previous visit.

#### *3.5.1.1 Staff members*

Over the two visits, three members of staff were interviewed, all with different roles within the prison. These members of staff were chosen by the wing manager, through conversations with myself, via email, prior to my visits. All three gave consent and were keen to participate. They were chosen due to their roles in closely supporting individuals with autism on the wing. One member of staff disclosed, outside of interviews, that they had a diagnosis of autism, therefore had lived experiences, and could relate more to the participants. As this discussion took place outside of formal interview, I did not feel it was appropriate to include personal details of the staff members, however, I thought it be vital to include this contextual factor within this thesis as it allows for a greater understanding as to why staff at Prison AA are passionate and enthusiastic about obtaining better and positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Details of individual members of staff who participated are outlined in their Pen Portraits (See Chapter 3, section, 3.10.9 - 3.10.11)

#### *3.5.1.2 Individuals with autism*

Over both visits, a total of eight prisoners with autism were interviewed. A total of 14 had consented to participate, however the final decision was made by prison managers. This was a factor outside of my control as I did not know the individuals willing to participate, their background or their current behaviours or circumstances, which may have affected their ability to participate. All eight who participated gave consent for me to interview staff members who knew them well, regarding the support they received whilst on C Block.

All prisoners had a formal diagnosis, however some also disclosed additional needs and conditions. Their experiences and backgrounds differed, and it was fascinating to listen and engage in meaningful conversations with all of them. All participants had experienced life in another prison, as well as different wings within Prison AA, therefore were able to compare any changes, adaptations and differences implemented since the introduction of C Block and the NAS Prison Standards. Everyone is discussed in greater detail in their personal ‘Pen Portrait’.

### 3.5.2 Pen Portraits

This section provides an insight into participants, including their backgrounds and important observational information.

### *3.5.2.1* Pen Portrait - **Adam**

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">— Adam —<br>Visit 1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context:<br><br>Interviewed on visit one. The room was empty, with three chairs, one bean bag and a small table. Plain walls. Room was located on C Block.</td><td>Background:<br>– Been in prison before<br>– Family lived far away from Prison AA, and did not visit Adam whilst in prison.<br>– Did not know he had a diagnosis until he was an adult, it was his parents' decision to keep it from him.<br>– Was new to C Block.<br>– That day, had just 'got off basic'</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Important/interesting points:<br>- On the day of the interview, his mother had telephoned him to end their relationship. This made Adam extremely upset and anxious about his release.<br>- Not been involved in any education and was unsure of what was available to him.<br>- Had been involved in altercations with staff and other prisoners when residing on another wing. Some staff thought this was because Adam had an issue with female authority.<br>- Felt strongly about abiding by the rules and would intervene with others if he felt they were not. This caused altercations.<br>- Had a positive relationship with Jonathan and felt comfortable enough discussing potential altercations on the wing with him.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observations/researcher thoughts:<br>- Appeared terribly upset and anxious at the start of the interview, but once he had explained about his phone call, he appeared to be more comfortable.<br>- When unsure of an answer, he would often re-read my information sheet. This is when I would distract him, give an example or re-word my question.<br>- Adam did not appear to have any interests, which could have been explored further whilst in prison.<br>Spoke slow and in one tone throughout the interview.</td></tr>
</table>

**3.5.2.2 Pen Portrait – Billy**

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">— Billy —<br>Visit 1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context:<br>Interviewed on visit one. The room was empty, with three chairs, one bean bag and a small table. Plain walls. Room was located on C Block.</td><td>Background:<br>▫ Been in prison before<br>▫ Was in care when he was younger.<br>▫ Loves animals.<br>▫ Knew a lot of people in prison.<br>▫ Lives in hostels within the community</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Important/interesting points:<br>- Used a lot of swear words throughout interview, as a way of expressing himself.<br>- Jonathan explained that Billy was a father. This was not something Billy disclosed.<br>- Had difficulty when somebody said they would do something and did not follow through. It was also a struggle for him if they did not tick to the given timeframe.<br>- His preferred method of communication was writing.<br>- Due to be released that day.<br>- Staff reported how many staff amongst the prison fear Billy.<br>- The interview was paused when therapy dogs entered the room to say hello to Billy. He instantly became calm. Expressed his love of animals.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observations/researcher thoughts:<br>- Swear words were thought to be a way of Billy expressing himself. He never swore at me, however, used the same words when speaking about both positive and negative things. Such language could be misinterpreted as verbally aggressive.<br>- Struggled to see any positives about his life, or prison.<br>- Took things very literal – black and white<br>Whole body appeared calmer when around the therapy dogs. Spoke calmer and quieter, no swearing, sat on their level, gave them cuddles. Appeared much happier.</td></tr>
</table>

**3.5.2.3 Pen Portrait – Carl**

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">— Carl —<br>Visit 1</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context:<br>Interviewed on visit one. The room was empty, with three chairs, one bean bag and a small table. Plain walls. Room was located on C Block.</td><td>Background:<ul><li>Been in prison before</li><li>Drug misuse</li><li>Family difficulties – does not speak to mother, was in care and removed away from his brother</li><li>Dual diagnosis of ASC and ADHD</li></ul></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Important/interesting points:<ul><li>Struggles socially – wants to fit in and will behave in a certain way to do this.</li><li>Spent time on the segregation wing due to perceived challenging behaviours.</li><li>Enjoys learning but opportunities to progress are restricted due to perceived challenging behaviours</li><li>Recognizes that he is easily led, however, does not appear to have strategies to reduce the risk of him being persuaded, by his peers, to participate in anti-social behaviours.</li><li>States that prison is better than the hostels he resides in within the community, just with less freedom.</li><li>Appears to not understand the meaning of a positive friendship – very one sided.</li></ul></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observations/researcher thoughts:<ul><li>Struggled to sit still and stay focused, lot of verbal and visual reminders when reverting back to the topic of conversation.</li><li>Became obsessed with the materials provided, such as a pen that could rub out, and a pencil that did not need sharpening. Asked if he could take one.</li><li>Enjoyed sitting on beanbags rather than chairs. He said he felt more comfortable.<br>Appeared as though staff perceive Carl as ‘dangerous’ rather than ‘vulnerable’ – language used and actions such as segregation, withdrawal of ‘privileges and escort around the prison on a 1:1 basis.</li></ul></td></tr>
</table>

**3.5.2.4 Pen Portrait – Daniel**

# — Daniel —

Visit 2

| **Context:** | **Background:** |
|---|---|
| Interviewed on visit two, after Covid-19. In the same room, however, it had work displayed on the walls, chairs, and small tables. | – Been in prison before<br>– All crimes are of a similar nature and relate to drugs.<br>– Family struggles throughout his life<br>– Loves boxing |

## Important/interesting points:

- Support with literacy and numeracy as well as basic computer skills (Stating the months of the year as well as his log in name)
- No contact with home during Covid, cannot read or write to exchange letters, did not like seeing them on video/facetime
- Feels the support from staff on the Wing has helped him get on 'enhanced'
- Talks about the 'sensory' room and how he can chat to staff in there, which helps him
- Feels staff listen to him and take the time for him – notices it
- Becomes frustrated if a member of staff says something and does not follow through
- No positive role models growing up – been around crime all his life
- Does not like change, especially to routine, has remembered it
- Will try and communicate with other offenders when in class, but only in small groups. Prefers own company
- Was 'lonely' during covid due to the amount of time on his own in his cell – would prefer to be on his own rather than share with people though

**Observations/researcher thoughts:**

- When did not want to answer a question, or did not understand, would always revert back to speaking about boxing – safe
- Academic levels low – stayed on the wing for additional support with this from trained staff
- Struggles socially, copies to try and fit in
- Gets on better with staff due to no judgement, greater understanding and predictable Enjoyed books (which stopped during Covid) but could not read them

**3.5.2.5 Pen Portrait – Edward**

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">— Edward —<br>Visit 2</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context:<br>Interviewed on visit two, after Covid-19. In the same room, however, it had work displayed on the walls, chairs, and small tables.</td><td>Background:<br>▫ Been in prison before and now on an IPP<br>▫ Family struggles throughout his life – childhood trauma<br>▫ Diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at 39<br>▫ Attended special school</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Important/interesting points:<br>- Spoke of his intelligence often, however, did not speak highly of his educational experienced and stated he attended a special needs school.<br>- Believes he has been in prison longer than should have been due to being wrongly placed on an IPP and now because of Covid being used for the delay.<br>- Felt very little support on the wing for ‘somebody like him’ who did not need help with day-to-day stuff.<br>- Has isolated himself due to fear of getting in trouble before being released from prison.<br>- Was a trusted prisoner and had responsibilities during the beginning of covid.<br>- Goes off the wing for education, however recently quit as he feels it is not productive. States he feels discriminated against as the ‘better’ apprenticeships and course are only for certain prisoners<br>- Has an idea to create an autistic community, with only individuals with autism present.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observations/researcher thoughts:<br>- Struggles socially.<br>- Education opportunities for him appear to be limited, with barriers not being overcome.<br>- Struggles to overcome altercations and disagreements with staff, will hold a grudge. Used a lot of ‘big words’ but not always in the correct context.</td></tr>
</table>

**3.5.2.6 Pen Portrait – Fred**

# — Fred —

Visit 2

**Context:**

Interviewed on visit two, after Covid-19. In the same room, however, it had work displayed on the walls, chairs, and small tables.

**Background:**

- Been in prison before all relating to drugs.
- Has contact with mum regularly.
- Ran away from an open prison previously

## Important/interesting points:

- Staff are more lenient and understanding of people needs on this wing
- He believed educational and rehabilitation courses are not helpful or productive, aimed more at offending behaviour/drugs rather than preparing you for release or getting a job
- Fred believes some people on the wing do not need the support available, they have 'just been dumped' down there and it takes away staff from the people who genuinely need it
- Referred to the visual aids around the wing
- Refereed to some prisoners as 'simple-minded'
- During Covid watched TV all day long and started to get lots in his own thoughts which he states is a bad thing
- Spoke to his mother more over Covid than ever as he phoned her rather than waiting for a visit
- One hour out of the cell was not productive as nothing was planned and few staff to support
- Was annoyed with staff shortages, especially during COVID

**Observations/researcher thoughts:**

- Fred appeared to suggest a hierarchy amongst prisoners, but he did not notice this – references Daniel "good for him on C Block as they can help him"
- Appeared to be unable to get hold of many drugs during Covid and this upset him.
- Was very popular within the wing and knew a lot of prisoners on other wings too – good social communication skills

  Appeared to be unable to relate or socialise with other prisoners he perceives as different – references another prisoner in a cell close to him who 'makes noises' and 'says weird things' to him.

**3.5.2.7 Pen Portrait – George**

| **— George —**<br>Visit 2 | |
|---|---|
| **Context:**<br>Interviewed on visit two, after Covid-19. In the same room, however, it had work displayed on the walls, chairs, and small tables. | **Background:**<br>▫ Been in prison before<br>▫ Surrounded by drugs whole life |
| **Important/interesting points:**<br>- Felt comfortable with people in Prison AA as he said they were 'his mates' and that he struggles to make friends and speak to people he does not know.<br>- Recognised that staff on other wings did not have knowledge and awareness of autism.<br>- Was making plans to 'chill' with his friends from prison upon his release.<br>- Never been employed, within prison or within the community. States he is keen to apply.<br>- Preferred C Block to any other wing/prison he has resided on – 'nice and calm'<br>- Literacy skills were low – identified that he may need support reading and understanding the savoury menu.<br>- Tried to stay out of altercations with other prisoners. | |
| **Observations/researcher thoughts:**<br>- Finished a lot of his responses with a question – "aren't I?" or "you get me?"<br>- Spoke very quietly throughout the whole interview.<br>Answers given were not extended and I would need to seek for further information. | |

**3.5.2.8 Pen Portrait – Harry**

# — Harry —

Visit 2

**Context:**

Interviewed on visit two, after Covid-19. In the same room, however, it had work displayed on the walls, chairs, and small tables.

**Background:**

- Been in prison before, over 20 years ago.
- Had a girlfriend in another prison, who he blamed for his crime.
- Openly discussed anxiety and how this previously impacted his life.
- Previously addicted to drugs

## Important/interesting points:

- Was able to identify on an induction questionnaire his anxiety and autism, which then triggered healthcare to support.
- Biggest focus was to get released from prison.
- Aim upon release was to get a car and a job – did not want to return to prison.
- Has contact with his mother and upon release will reside there.
- Felt that staff on C Block are more understanding and caring – "actually talk to you and care about you."
- Knew a few of the individuals on the wing from his previous time in prison, as well as in the community.
- Was upset during COVID that he struggled to speak to his girlfriend.
- Felt comfortable asking for help if he felt he needed it, both staff and other prisoners.
- Relationships with staff had improved over COVID
- Previously, his anxiety prevented him from accessing his community. He informed me of a support worker he had that would come and encourage him to leave the house.
- Mum writes him letters, but he struggles to read them and respond.

**Observations/researcher thoughts:**

- Appeared very proud of himself that he had not been in prison for a significant period of time, however, was upset that he now found himself back in for something, he believes was not his fault.
- Answers given were very short and he needed examples or additional, very specific questions prior to giving further details.
  Did not report any feelings of anxiety during prison. Presented as quiet at the beginning of the interview, but once everything was explained, appeared to be calmer.

**3.5.2.9 Pen Portrait - Jonathan – Staff 1**

# — Jonathan —

Visit 1 & 2

| **Context:** | **Background:** |
|---|---|
| Interviewed on visit one and two, after Covid-19. Role as key worker manager. | – Worked within prisons for over 10 years.<br>– Worked in Prison AA for five years.<br>– New to his current role during visit |

## Important/interesting points:

- Discussed how his mindset had changed since working alongside the NAS – he feels he has a greater understanding of autism and how it presents, therefore he is not quick to negatively judge challenging situations but instead thinks of contributing factors.
- He felt that his role in overseeing the daily running of the wing was vital but also allowed him to become aware and knowledgeable of individual needs and how best to meet them.
- Stated that he had offered advice to other colleagues on how to effectively meet individual needs, however, this was not always positively received or followed.
- Spoke highly of C Block, however, criticized the rest of the prisons approach to it
- All participants within this study spoke highly of Jonathan, stating that he had positive listening skills, good sense of humour and effective communication.
- Jonathan stated how his current role was the most challenging, but most rewarding.
- Felt a little let down by the NAS during COVID due to their lack of guidance in supporting individuals with autism. Jonathan stated how he felt he just 'had to do his best, with the knowledge he had'

**Observations/researcher thoughts:**

- During the first visits, Jonathan's language was not always reflecting a social model perspective, using words/phrases such as 'vulnerable', 'kick off' and 'something wrong with them'.
- Jonathan was able to give specific examples of how he has supported individuals in different situations, highlighting his recognition and understanding of a variety of needs present.
- Appeared upset by the lack of guidance during COVID, however, appeared to have a sense of pride that he had offered continued support for individuals with autism, giving specific positive examples.

**3.5.2.10 Pen Portrait - Emma - Staff 2**

# — Emma —

Visit 1 & 2

| **Context:** | **Background:** |
|---|---|
| Interviewed on visit one and two, after Covid-19. Role as a teacher, responsible for development and progression. | – Career in supporting individuals with autism within the community.<br>– Worked at the prison for three years.<br>– Helped set up the wing and worked alongside the NAS for guidance and support |

## Important/interesting points:

- Role also included training and development of staff across the prison to ensure a 'whole prison approach' to supporting individuals with autism.
- Role slightly changed during the second visit and focused more on the development and planning of education within the prison, mainly on C Block. Making it more accessible for individuals with autism, by providing a range of opportunities to increase their participation and enjoyment of learning.
- Keen to continue to develop educational programme and include more 'real life' learning – spoke positively about the National Railway Contract they had recently established.
- Was spoken very highly of by participants.
- Referred to herself as 'mother hen' to not only the participants within this study, but also the other individuals on the wing.
- Offers advocacy support to participants, supporting with probation meetings and interviews ready for release

**Observations/researcher thoughts:**

- Potentially acting as an 'Autism Champion' as she is assisting the prison in developing and delivering autism awareness training to staff, offering advice and support when required.
- Appeared very passionate about the progression of individuals with autism on the wing, as well as the awareness and understanding of autism across the prison. Works outside of hours, planning and applying for grants, external contract, and further educational opportunities to enhance the success of the individuals she supports.

**3.5.2.11 Pen Portrait - Mike - Staff 3**

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">— Mike —<br>Visit 2</td></tr>
<tr><td>Context:<br><br>Interviewed only on visit two, after COVID. New to the wing. Role was to support within the classroom and on the wing</td><td>Background:<br><br>- Worked in another part of the prison for many years.<br>- Has previously supported on the Education Wing</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Important/interesting points:<br>- Stated that he felt the move to C Block was ‘eye opening’ as he was able to see the level of support some individuals needed and the difference it made when it was provided.<br>- Prior to moving to C Block, had negative preconceived notions about individuals who resided there<br>- Formed a positive relationship with one participant, with whom he spoke a lot about. He discussed his achievements.<br>- Discussed how staff on other wings are not always receptive to advice regarding supporting individuals with autism but instead would rather transfer them to C Block.<br>- Did a lot of social activities with individuals with autism, as well as supporting within the classroom. This allows for positive relationships to be built.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Observations/researcher thoughts:<br>- Was older than the other members of staff interviewed.<br>- Appeared proud of the participants achievements and his role in supporting them. He did give examples and always smiled and laughed when doing so.<br>- Language he used was not always social model friendly.<br>- Appeared amazed at the adaptations, adjustments, changes, and support offered on C Block, compared to the rest of the prison.<br>Appeared to have informal relationships with participants, which worked well, and made them feel at ease.</td></tr>
</table>

### 3.5.3 Working with autistic prisoners and rapport building

There are many ethical and methodological challenges associated with interviewing autistic prisoners and few individuals have the skills to successfully achieve this. My personal, educational, and professional experience, as discussed prior in this chapter, allowed me to appropriately communicate with participants with autism. Having an awareness of the difficulties typically associated with autism, such as social communication and interaction, as well as recognising and managing emotions (Vinter et al, 2020; Allely, 2015), I was able to understand how to alleviate some of these challenges.

Prior to my arrival, I requested to be sent photographs of a variety of locations around the prison via email (see chapter 11 appendices). These photographs were used throughout all interviews as a visual aid for participants and a way to support increased understanding and positive communication (NAS, 2020). I requested a variety of locations, such as a cell, the communal yard, a wing, a classroom along with any other 'important' sites within the prison. Although it took two months to receive the photographs due to prison officers time constraints, eight were then received. This helped me to form a visual impression of the environment in which the participants live, prior to my visit. These did include a prisoners cell (although this was later confirmed by participants in this study, it was not a cell they reside in but instead looked like an 'enhanced' cell), a classroom which suggested individuals with low literacy and numeracy skills would utilise, as well as the yard, entrance, impressive wall murals and the canteen (see appendices 11.1-11.7). I ensured these were present during all interviews to enable myself and all participants to refer to them when discussing the layout and facilities available on C Block. Writing and drawing materials were also available throughout all interviews, enabling participants to express themselves in alternative ways. Billy did express his preference to write his thoughts and emotions down, however, stated that he would need more time than the interview allowed. Only one participant chose to utilise these resources, drawing a sketch of what his cell looks like compared to the images displayed (see appendices 11.8).

I believe that my down to earth personality, which was described as 'common as muck' by one of the participants allowed me to quickly build positive rapports. On several occasions, participants also joked about my Mancunian accent, comparing how certain words were pronounced differently. This friendly 'banter' and joking appeared to make individuals with autism feel comfortable within my presence, with their body language suggesting they were relaxed and at ease, lying back in their chair, looking in my direction when speaking, and talking with their hands, rather than fidgeting or looking towards the door. Additionally, all participants disclosed personal information such as health conditions, family history and

addictions, again suggesting they felt comfortable enough in my presence. All interviews began with an informal conversation, unrelated to the research. This was led by the participants themselves, who began talking about their interests or asking me questions which I was happy to discuss. Feeling comfortable within my presence from the beginning was imperative if interviews were to be successful.

All interviews commenced in a familiar room within the compounds of C Block, to ensure individuals were as comfortable as possible as well as reducing the pressure on prison staff who were required to support on the wing. Although interviews commenced in the same room on both visits, observations identified drastic changes to the décor. A room that in 2019 contained just one table, two beanbags and discoloured white walls, was a bright room in 2021, displaying the many achievements of individuals with autism, on the walls, such as artwork and creative writing stories. Four comfortable leather seats, small tables, and a cupboard which contained boardgames were also seen on the second visit. Jonathan stated that the room was now a 'chill out room' which could be utilised by all individuals on the wing throughout the day. They were able to socialise, with the support of prison staff, play games together, participate in arts and crafts, relax as well as admire their achievements. This suggested that the prison had identified resources and facilities that can support meaningful activities for individuals with autism and begun to implement them.

The rich, insightful data in the subsequent chapters demonstrates that my rapport building was successful, as respondents were comfortable to share personal and at times painful views and experiences with me. . After interviews commenced, Emma made contact to inform me she was leaving the prison to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism at a higher level within the justice system. She suggested I seriously consider undertaking her role within the prison, stating that she would fully support me throughout my journey.

### 3.5.4 Semi-structured interviews

To successfully evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of a programme, interviews are perceived to be the main and most successful method of gathering data across the social sciences (Manzano, 2016). Using a qualitative approach, face-to-face interviews were the chosen method of obtaining raw data within this study. According to Bell (2014), interviews are a great way of quickly obtaining individuals opinions, knowledge, and attitudes, with the added advantage of immediately developing and clarifying certain responses given. Although realist evaluators may argue that a mixed method approach is more beneficial and using just one can limit data results (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012), it was identified that solely using interviews was the most effective method. This was

due to other data collection approaches, such as focus groups, observations, or questionnaires, being challenging or unsuitable for individuals with autism, given their associated difficulties with social communication and interaction, and potentially low literacy and numeracy skills. Keeping this research as accessible as possible was a priority, especially if high quality data was to be obtained.

Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask important questions relating directly to the research, such as positive relationships, accessibility, adaptations, routines, as well as communication and awareness of staff. The guide to the interview also provided individuals with a brief overview of the general topics wanting to be discussed, allowing preparation, and processing time, reducing any anxiety. This method also provides participants the opportunity to add details and opinions which may not have been thought of, or covered, by myself. This proved evident in all interviews, with each participant disclosing information and details voluntarily, such as Adam, who disclosed a difficult conversation he had just encountered with his mother, or Fred who was open about his substance addiction. Semi-structured interviews also allow participants to take some control of the interview, being able to direct questioning and providing them with an opportunity for their voices to be heard successfully.

All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone to ensure accuracy. Any misunderstandings or unknown phrases used were addressed during the interview, mainly with participants explaining them without asking. This happened with Adam, who frequently used the terms ‘black and white prison’ however at the start of the interview did clarify what he meant by this, without me prompting him. This was helpful for the write up stage of this thesis. As stated earlier in this chapter, verbal and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to any interview commencing, with all participants being provided with an interview protocol prior to my visit. Interview protocols were amended slightly for the second visit to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their ability to implement the NAS’ Prison Standards and the effect this had on individuals with autism.

The structure of the interviews with individuals with autism focussed on their experiences of prison life, education, purposeful activities, changes, and adaptations; positive and negative, communication as well as relationships between themselves, staff, other people within prison and those within the community. Having a guide, which acted as visual aid to myself and the participants throughout, appeared to allow them to feel at ease as they knew what themes were being discussed, but also allowed me to explore any interesting comments or topics emerging from the interview. The protocol for staff members was slightly different, as I wished to gain an insight into their views and experiences of the NAS programme, the changes that have been implemented, any personal impact, as well as

clarification and increased understanding of the individuals with autism who participated in this study. Due to this, interviews were split into two parts; views and opinions on the Prison Standards and how this has affected them personally, and then their views on how the individuals participating in this study have adapted to prison life, discussing personal accounts of experiences. All individuals with autism consented to members of staff discussing them during interviews.

## 3.6 Research Questions

This discussed in detail in this chapter, this study was devised into two phases. Phase one consisted of semi-structured interviews with two individuals from the NAS. Phase Two was the main data collection for this thesis, and involved interviewing individuals with autism, alongside three members of staff. Two research questions underpin this thesis:

1. In what ways do the National Autistic Society's Autism Accreditation Programme's Prison Standards affect the outcomes for individuals with autism?
2. Who does the National Autistic Society's Autism Accreditation Programme's Prison Standards work for, under what circumstances, why and how?

## 3.7 Data Analysis

As stated previously, to analyze the raw data collected, this study adopted a realist evaluation approach, specially referring to Kazi's (1999) realist effectiveness cycle. The final component in this cycle is 'outcomes', however adopting this approach recognises that this is not always the final stage, as it can bring more questions and recommendations which can be explored further. Once interviews were finalised, they were transcribed by me and then analysed using direct content analysis, guided by the C-M-O framework used in realist evaluation. This study employs a thematic approach when analysing the data.

### 3.7.1 Realist Evaluation

Realist evaluation is a theory-driven approach to evaluate social programmes or interventions (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012) which produce mixed social outcomes. It is based on realism, a perspective that views the social world as 'real'. The purpose of realist evaluation is not to evaluate outcomes, but instead to explore why particular outcomes have been produced. Emphasis is placed on social programmes working differently for different people, in different circumstances, in different places at different times, therefore they are not successful indefinitely; not a 'one size fits all' intervention (Pawson and Tilley, 2004). Within this context, Pawson and Tilley (2004) state that a social

programme is regarded as an intervention brought about to initiate a social change, by the desire to improve certain situations and evaluate why particular interventions produce particular outcomes. To do this, Pawson and Tilley (1997) highlight three components necessary for understanding and analysing programmes; Context – Mechanism – Outcome (CMO). This framework allows realists to explore 'the why' in relation to a particular context and mechanism, producing a particular outcome.

#### *3.7.1.1 Context*

Context is an initial, but integral part of the CMO cycle and has a significant effect on programme outcomes, as well as the effectiveness of the mechanisms. Variations between beliefs, values, economic and cultural backgrounds as well as social and political circumstances can influence whether particular mechanisms are successful and whether an outcome is produced. Programmes and interventions do not work everywhere, for everyone, and the context can have a massive effect on the outcome of such programmes. Prison AA plays a significant role with the context of the CMO cycle, within this study.

#### *3.7.1.2 Mechanism*

Programme mechanisms are processes, tools or interactions which produce certain outcomes, due to specific contexts. Pawson and Tilley (1997) state that mechanisms often prioritise individual's interactions, understandings and reasonings, however Westhorpe (2014) concludes that this should be extended to include how and why change occurs due to the particular mechanism implemented. Westhorpe (2014) argues that mechanisms are not always intended, however this is due to some not always directly visible, meaning researchers cannot 'observe' when a social programme has been implemented successfully or not. Thus, information on intended participants/respondents can prove invaluable if mechanisms of social programmes are to be analysed and understood appropriately (Westhorpe, 2014). Education, within this study, would be considered a mechanism.

#### *3.7.1.3 Outcome*

Within this context, an outcome is defined as a change brought about by an intervention or programme (Westhorpe, 2014). An example of an intended outcome is successful community reintegration. Although interventions and programmes have desired outcomes, realist evaluation explores why such outcomes have occurred, examining the context and mechanisms impacting it. Exploring differences in patterns of outcomes, helps realists explain and analyse what works for whom, under what conditions, and why. Only then can the effectiveness of programmes be determined and continuously evaluated. Social programmes can also produce unintended outcomes, which can further contribute towards explain what works for whom, under what circumstances and why.

#### *3.7.1.4 C-M-O in relation to this study*

To fully answer the research aims, this study adopted a realist approach, exploring what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why. Speaking directly to individuals with autism themselves I was able to obtain their truth, allowing for a detailed insight into the contextual, environmental, social, attitudinal, and cultural conditions that may affect the implementation of the standards, and whether this impacted the desired outcomes. In this instance, the programme was designed and implemented to bring about a positive social change for individuals with autism in prison; promoting a healthy and stimulating environment where such individuals can obtain appropriate and effective support to rehabilitate, learning and make personal progression. C-M-O configurations within this study were initially constructed by literature reviews, analysis of government policies and the NAS Prison Standards. These were then developed further by interviews with the programme architects and then 'tested' in Phase Two of this study. Examples include;

1. (C) Designated specialist wing – (M) Trained specialist staff who have a greater understanding of autism – (O) effective support delivered

2. (C) Individual with negative educational experience – (M) Support and accommodations to access some form of learning – (O) increased participation in education and improved knowledge

3. (C) Individual with difficulties verbalising thoughts, feelings and wishes – (M) Autism Specific training for staff – (O) Adaptations to behaviour policy, introduction of a range of communication aids

This framework recognises that one particular context and mechanism, does not always produce the same outcome each time, however the purpose it to explore *why* and *how* and *for whom*.

### 3.7.2 Realism and Disability Studies

Realism suggests that reality exists, and knowledge is obtained, through observation and scientific laws. Critical realism adds a layer to this, recognizing that although the 'real world' can be observed, our knowledge and understanding of it, is shaped by our experiences (Danermark et al, 2019). Thus, according to critical realists, the social world can only be understood if individuals appreciate the "unobservable" structures produced within the real world (Danermark et al, 2019). Danermark (2002) argues the stratification of reality has two dimensions: ontological domains and strata. The first aims to understand the complexity of reality by distinguishing between the empirical: what individuals observe, actual: situations that arise and real: the underlying mechanisms that influence our reality. The second dimension refers to the order of reality consisting of in hierarchically levels including physical,

psychological, social and biological (Danermark, 2002). These dimensions recognise that various layers and mechanisms intertwine to shape individuals' experiences and perceptions, thus understanding the complexity of 'reality'. Realism and critical realism have been linked to disability studies in many ways. Shakespeare (2013) has criticised the social model of disability and instead argues that a critical realist perspective is required to fully understand disability. In his book, Shakespeare (2013) affirms that disability is complex and requires various layers to fully understand it, including biological, social, cultural and psychological. Although Shakespeare (2013) acknowledges that social barriers are present and do hinder inclusion for disabled people, he argues that other factors such as the limitations and psychological factors having a physical impairment can bring, does impact an individual's 'reality' and their experience of the real world. Shakespeare (2013) states that critical realism allows for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding disability in this way. Critical realism is also present within criminology. Matthews (2014) criticises mainstream criminology, suggesting that more focus should be on 'real-world' problems which are addressed more practically. Taking a critical realist approach, Matthews (2014) argues that social justice and the safety of communities could be prioritised. Critiquing other theories, such as positivism, which relies heavily on observational data, Matthews (2014) advocated for a greater understanding and analysis of the causes of crime. By taking a critical realist approach, it would allow for an increase in knowledge and understanding of the various factors which influence crime but also what efforts could be implemented to prevent future lawbreaking.

### 3.7.3 Realist Effectiveness Cycle and its implementation in this study.

The design, implementation and analysis of this research was guided by Kazi (1999) Realist Effectiveness Cycle (Figure 2), which has been adapted from Pawson and Tilley (1991). Kazi (2003) explains that the social sciences move around in 'small circles', as knowledge is a continuous development, with theories being tested repeatedly, as situations and behaviours change interchangeably. By adopting this structured and systematic approach, focusing on what mechanism in what context produce particular outcomes, the aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of the prison standards, from the viewpoint of individuals with autism.

The first component of the cycle is 'Theories and Model of Intervention Service Provision' which refers to the initial design stage, where any pre-existing knowledge is obtained to create potential research aims and questions (Kazi, 2003). Phase One of this study is the initial stage of the effectiveness cycle. Although in its own right, is a small-scale study, the purpose was to obtain greater knowledge of the programme mechanisms and how they were intended to work as well as to explore what the desired

outcomes should be and how I would know whether these had been achieved. Analysis of the interviews conducted, allowed the context and mechanisms of the programme to be identified and better understood, creating 'testable' hypothesis, explored in Phase Two with individuals with autism.

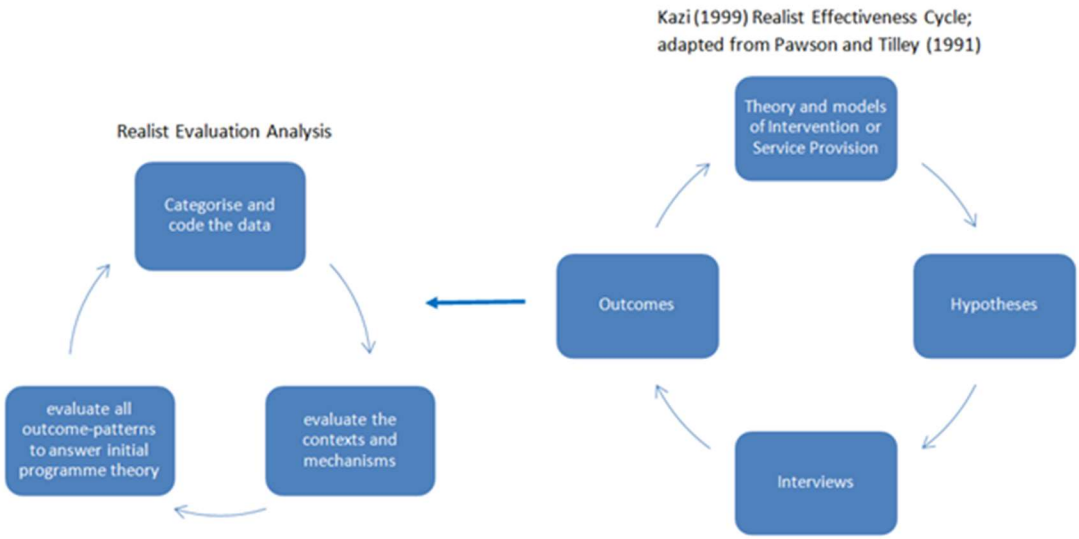
Analysis of Phase One of this study by hand, identifying common themes and coding by colour, generated numerous codes which were then categorised into common themes (Context and Mechanisms). This shaped component two of Kazi's (1991) effectiveness cycle; 'Hypothesis', and my research questions. Evaluating participant responses from Phase One of this study, allowed me to formulate an interview protocol for all participants for Phase Two. This interview protocol included common topics and themes that were wanting to be explored further, to identify what particular mechanisms implemented, in what context, produced a particular outcome for whom, and why. The main focus was the changes and adaptations brought about by the introduction of the Prison Standards, exploring the environmental, attitudinal, structural, and social barriers/enablers to the success of the programme.

Component three of Kazi's (1991) effectiveness cycle is the data collection phase. In this study, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method due to time scales as well as the needs of the participants involved. Kazi (2003) highlights how appropriate data methods should be sought if evidence is to be provided as to whether the social programme has brought about change. As discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, semi-structured interviews coupled with interview protocols provided prior to the visit, allowed individuals with autism to gain a brief overview of what was going to be discussed in the interview, minimising anxiety. It also ensured that all context and mechanisms identified in Phase One were discussed at length but gave room for interesting topics of conversation to be explored further, should they arise.

The final – but not final – component of Kazi's (1991) cycle is the outcome stage, where data is analysed, and recommendations made. As Kazi (2003:24) states, social programmes "cannot be explained in isolation; rather, they can only be explained in the sense of a mechanism that is introduced." Taking a realist approach to analysing data, it is noted that outcomes are context and mechanism specific, therefore are not always continuously repeated, producing different outcomes. Due to this, although recommendations can be made, the programme or intervention will continuously be evaluated as the context and mechanisms change, producing a range of outcomes. In this study, context and mechanisms out of my control, such as COVID-19, which significantly impacted the outcomes for individual with

autism. Nevertheless, a range of views and experiences were sought and analysed, highlighting how the prison standards have brought about positive change for individuals with autism in prison.

*Figure 2: Kazi (1999) Realist Effectiveness Cycle, adapted from Pawson and Tilley (1991)*




### 3.7.4 Phase One analysis

To truly understand the aims, expectations and desired outcomes of the development and implementation of the NAS' Autism Accreditation Prison Standards, a four-step analysis was undertaken. Due to these interviews taking place over Skype, body language and any environmental factors were difficult to interpret, therefore my analysis lies solely on the verbal language used.

**Stage 1: Document Analysis of the NAS Autism Accreditation Prison Standards**

To gain a greater understanding of the prison standards, the document was analysed methodically, by hand. Using a range of colours for different topics of interest, common words/phrases as well as regular themes, analysis of the standards gave a starting point to the aims and desired outcomes of the programme. Making analytical notes in the margins, allowed me to begin to make connections and draw conclusions based on the language and statements used in the standards. Common and interesting themes were then highlighted and structured in a separate document, which then helped guide my semi-structured interviews with the programme architects.

**Stage 2: Transcribing and becoming familiar with the data**

Once interviews had taken place, after analysing the Prison standards for key themes to discuss, this part of the process began with transcribing two interviews, on Microsoft Word over a month, shortly after the interviews were conducted. This process took longer than expected, as I continuously listened to the recordings and re-read the transcripts. This helped me become familiar with the data as well as help me identify any mistakes or misunderstandings in the transcripts.

**Stage 3: Coding and identifying common themes**

Once familiar with the data, a systematic analysis took place. . Initially, NVivo was utilised to organise and categorise my data to support the identification of common themes, phrase and words. Later, it was felt that printing transcripts and methodically re-reading them, was more beneficial. Analytical notes were also made in the margins of the transcripts, highlighting key themes, phrases or specific language used. Once common themes, phrases and words were highlighted, as well as interesting points, these were examined and collated into related topics and then transferred into separate documents. This resulted in several documents, each being labelled as a common theme or interest to be further explored.

**Stage 4: Finalising key themes to be explored further**

Both participants expressed similar desired outcomes for the Prison Standards, such as training, better communication and the implementation of adaptations and adjustments where appropriate. However, there were some themes that I felt required further investigation that only one participant discussed, this was the role of 'autism champions'. Using analysis from the prison standards, as well as data from the interviews, it was apparent that such phrases required further investigation as this role linked to mentoring, social interaction and forming relationships; phrases and themes which were not necessarily identified in the standards or during interviews, as a key topic. Analysis of the Prison Standards and interviews, then allowed me to build a 'Programme Theory', identified earlier in this chapter. Key and interesting themes were then established, which helped shape my research questions for Phase Two of this study.

### 3.7.5 Phase Two analysis

Like the analysis used in Phase One, guided by the C-M-O framework, Phase Two analysis began by transcribing all interviews, including field note observations. Pen portraits (see Chapter 3.10.1 - 3.10.8) were also devised, providing a greater insight into the personalities and background experiences of

participants. This helped me understand my data better and work towards analysing what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why.

**Stage 1: Transcribing and finding preconceived common themes**

Transcribing all of data was completed on Microsoft Word and took a considerable amount of time. I found this particularly challenging as time went on, as my memory of the interviews were not as 'fresh' therefore on a number of occasions I would need to re-listen to certain parts of the interview to ensure words and phrases were not misinterpreted, due to differences in accents and the use of 'prison slang'. During this process, I would colour code certain quotations from participants when they directly linked to my research questions. Once transcribing was complete, continuous re-reading of the data was required to ensure it was familiar and to help identify any additional, interesting, or different themes emerging.

Themes included:

- Training and the impact of this, for the prison staff community.
- Educational and rehabilitation courses.
- Reasonable adjustments, adaptations, and good practice, including awareness of the physical environment and sensory sensitivities.
- Accessible information and collaborative working across services, such as education, healthcare, and parole boards.
- Support to cope with the pressures and stress of everyday prison life.
- Building and maintaining relationships

Quotations and phrases linked to some of these themes were initially identified during the transcribing process as they directly linked to my research questions.

**Stage 2: Coding and new emerging themes**

Human coding was the preferred method to analyse my data as it helped me build connections and become more familiar with participants responses. Using the codes already established during the transcribing process, each quotation was collated and copied into separate documents, with the correct title. Sub-codes began to emerge during the coding process. Alongside the preexisting themes, formed from Phase One, the data also provided new and interesting topics which could not be dismissed. These included sensory sensitivities, the physical environment as well as childhood experience and family

relationships within the community. Interpretations and assumptions were also established from the data, which helped add further context to evidence to common themes. Once codes were finalised, with the authentic data included under each one, greater in-depth analysis began and are the subsequent chapters within this thesis.

**Stage 3: Analysing raw data**

Four key themes emerged from this study, with many sub-codes creating a more detailed insight into the responses of the participants. Taking a social model approach and using realist evaluation, this study aimed to answer, in detail, its two research questions.

## 3.8 Limitations, challenges and how they were overcome

This research was conducted in a prison and involved participants considered as 'vulnerable' (Allely, 2015). Alongside the limitations and challenges this brings, phase two was also conducted over two visits, one of which was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this added interesting, unique, and rich data to the study, it did bring about different challenges which needed to be overcome.

### 3.8.1 Maternity leave and time scales

Personal circumstances resulted in Phase Two of this study being conducted in two visits. Whilst this offered interesting comparative insights into the development of the standards over a period of time, the length of time between the two visits is considered a limitation. HMPPS ethics restricted me from interviewing prisoners whilst pregnant, and although alternatives were suggested, such as being separated by a glass wall, I felt this was not appropriate, given the needs of the individuals I was interviewing. As discussed in greater detail in previous chapters, individuals with autism typically experience difficulties with social communication and interaction, therefore interviewing them through a glass wall may have negatively affected my data due to them feeling uncomfortable or judged (they may perceive I feel unsafe within their presence). This would affect my ability to build a positive rapport with them. Due to this, the decision was made to postpone interviews until after my maternity leave, however this time scale was again pushed back due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.8.2 Sampling

Due to the time limitations of being a PhD student, as well as the constraints of a prison environment, only eight individuals with autism were interviewed, over two visits. Although this study only involves the voices of eight individuals with autism, the sampling size does not take away from the quality of the data. Additionally, taking a realist evaluation approach, this study does not claim to explore or affirm the

impact of the programme for *all* individuals with autism, but instead examines why it works/does not work, for particular individuals, in what context and why. Such outcomes can then make recommendations for future research.

Additionally, all participants were chosen by prison officers. Although I requested individuals to adhere to certain 'criteria', such as having a formal diagnosis of autism and having experienced time in another prison, it is recognised that this does create a bias; one which is out of my control. Having no knowledge of an individual's background or personal difficulties which may affect their ability to successfully and safely participate, affected my ability to control this aspect of the study. Conversations with Jonathan about the prison's decision on the selected participants, prior to his recorded interview, did suggest that recent behaviours, their current location (one was currently located on the segregation wing), their ability to engage in conversation with an unfamiliar adult, as well as their routine for the day, all impacted staff's decision. Therefore, it was necessary for staff to choose, as it was vital that minimal disruption and distress was caused by my interviews.

### 3.8.3 Sensory considerations within the prison environment

As I am unaware of the prison environment, the available spaces and appropriate locations, the room in which interviews were conducted in was chosen by the prison officers. This could be seen as a limitation, as I am unsure whether environmental sensory sensitivities were taken into consideration (Vinter et al, 2020). Although the room used was familiar to all participants and was on the wing they reside, I did not raise questions around participants thoughts and feelings towards the space, which could have affected their ability to full participate within the study.

The room was located on a corridor, which was used frequently by other prisoners and members of staff who were coming and going off the wing. The noise from the corridor could be heard and, on some occasions, did distract participants. On two occasions interviews were interrupted, once by a member of staff querying drinks orders, and another by the therapy dogs. Luckily, on both occasions the participants were able to restart the interview without issues. Although the classroom was familiar to all participants, the location of it was not necessarily ideal and I would consider this a limitation.

### 3.8.4 Safety precautions

To ensure the safety of myself and all participants, a familiar officer, who escorted all individuals taking part in the study, was always close by. This limitation could have impacted participants ability to feel comfortable enough to divulge personal information as well as their views and experiences of members

of staff. Although I feel this was not the case, with the data collected including both positive and negative views of members of staff, this limitation may still have restricted participants to speak freely, as officers were in earshot.

During the second visit, in September 2021, additional safety precautions were implemented following government guidelines on reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Social distancing rules meant that participants were forced to sit further away from me, which did not help create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. Although guidelines suggested the usage of face masks, all participants requested mine was removed for the duration of the interview. Whilst travelling through the prison, I had to ensure my mask was always on. Additionally, physical contact was prohibited, resulting in me being unable to shake hands at the end of the interview. This had been something which was participant led during the first visit and felt like an appropriate and pleasant way to end a positive interaction; however, this was restricted during the second visit. Finally, to help reduce the spread of the virus, I was unable to provide individuals with writing and drawing materials as an alternative method of communication, as well as bring printed versions of the photographs supplied for my first visit. As this was anticipated, I had requested the prison provide me with such materials, prior to the visit, which they obliged. Although the pandemic brought about limitations such as those above, it is believed that they did not hinder the rich data obtained but instead enhanced it.

## 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the methodological approaches taken to analyse the raw and unique data obtained from interviews individuals with autism and professionals who know them well. Using realist evaluation, the aim of the study is to explore what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why. Considering individuals personal experiences and attitudes, as well as the adaptations, changes, and adjustments the prison is implementing, adopting this approach enables an insight into whether the desired outcomes for the NAS autism accreditation programme, Prison Standards, have been achieved. Additionally, this research is underpinned by the social model of disability, which structures the research questions and approaches to data collection. The views and experiences of individuals with autism are central and the main source of information within this study.

Particular attention was given to the design and structure of this study, ensuring that it was completely transparent and accessible for all participants with autism. Nevertheless, sensitive research involving participants considered to be ‘vulnerable’ within a prison setting, is always going to present challenges which are out of my control. I believe my prior knowledge, experience and education allowed me to

anticipate potential limitations, challenges, and restrictions, of which every effort was made to overcome these. Regardless of the limitations and challenges, further research involving marginalised groups is required if professionals and policy makers are to understand how best to support such individuals. As an under-researched topic (Allely, 2015) little is known about the experiences of individuals with autism in prison, from their personal perspective. Consequently, individuals with autism can often be misunderstood (NAS, 2019), resulting in their needs being unmet. Ideologies, such as those discovered in Charles et al (2014) are unhelpful and harmful, when suggesting that the inclusion of individuals who are considered as 'vulnerable' or who have 'mental health or drug issues' would undermine the validity of the research. Individuals with autism are experts on their own experiences and needs (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2021) and excluding them from research that involves decisions that affect their lives, would be a travesty.

# 4.Chapter Four: Aims of the Autism Accreditation Programme: Findings from NAS experts

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by analysing the prison standards, critically examining each section, and exploring intended aims and expectations of the NAS. The second part of this chapter will then discuss the findings from two semi-structured interviews with two individuals from the NAS, instrumental in the designing, developing, and implementing of the prison standards.

The rationale for conducting a scoping study was to gain a greater and more in-depth understanding of the NAS' core aims of the accreditation programme for prisons, with a view to building a programme theory about how the standards are intended to positively improve practice for individuals with autism. Speaking directly to the individuals from the NAS, Phase One sought to explore what the 'programme architects' hoped to gain by adapting it for prisons. The standards were released to me prior to interviews commencing. The final version of the NAS prison standards covers three main sections: *Custody and Care, Learning and Skills* and *Health Services.* All three were discussed at length by both participants, giving explanations and examples of why they felt these parts were at the core of providing prisons with the tools to effectively support individuals with autism. The key findings and conclusions from this helped to shape the main theoretical framework for Phase Two.

## 4.2 The National Autistic Societies Prison Standards – Document Analysis

This section will begin with a brief overview of the NAS' prison standards, explaining their contents and layout. Following this, there will be a document analysis of the standards, which helped guide the semi-structured interviews conducted in Phase One. These interviews will be analysed and discussed later in this chapter. As discussed in Chapter One, the Autism Accreditation Programme was not originally designed for prison environments, however, recognition of a need for further advice and support from HMP & YOI Feltham, began the process of developing and implementing appropriate standards. The final version of the standards covers all providers within a prison, with the aim to encourage them to all work together to produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism (Hughes, 2019).

### 4.2.1 Shape and structure of the Prison Standards Document

The standards are split into three sections, each one identified as a key component in an individual's prison journey. Under each section, there are multiple questions, acting as guiding principles which the NAS uses to judge effectiveness of the prison in relation to providing positive outcomes for individuals

with autism. The core aim of the standards is to provide a consistent approach, with staff throughout the prison having more knowledge and awareness of autism (Hughes, 2019) which would then lead to positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

*Part one: Care and Custody,* as it is known in the standards*,* focuses on the induction process and the care and support provided for individuals with autism during their time in prison. Induction is the initial part of the prison environment that individuals with autism encounter, and emphasis is placed on early identification. Having aware and knowledgeable staff is a significant aspect of successfully identifying individuals with autism upon entering prison, and providing them with the best support, reducing the stress that an induction process can bring (McCulloch, 2012). Without a universally identified screening tool as well as a legal duty to screen for additional needs, individuals with autism may still go unrecognised. Yet, the NAS supports the notion that *having* trained induction staff who can identify characteristics typically associated with autism, will help reduce the risk that individuals may 'fall through the net'. Providing quality and effective support throughout an individual's prison journey is also key to enhancing positive outcomes. This part of the standards also focuses on the prison recognising potential barriers and putting adjustments in place, considering individual needs as well as effective communication and sharing between services.

*Part Two: Learning and Skills*, focuses on the inclusivity of education and rehabilitation opportunities for individuals with autism. Ensuring that adjustments are made to allow full participation in all education, work and skills provisions, this part of the standards asks prisons how they explore the potential barriers which may prevent equal and full inclusion of individuals with autism, as well as question how these may be overcome. Less attention is given to the type of activity and instead focus is on how barriers within the prison can be overcome to enable individuals with autism to participate in education, purposeful activity, and development of skills, if they choose.

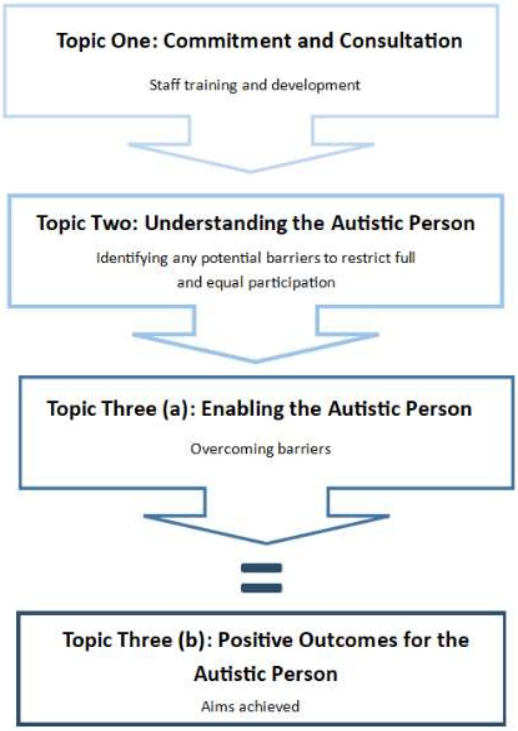
*Part three: Health Services,* covers all health-related services within a prison environment, including physical and mental health. This part aims to promote an easy and accessible health service for all individuals with autism, with trained staff who understand how to provide effective care and treatment, when required. Emphasis is placed on effective communication between health services to ensure an easy and consistent approach is delivered.

Under all three parts discussed above, the standards are then split into three topics, with topic three being split into two; *Topic One: Commitment and Consultation, Topic Two: Understanding the Autistic*

*Person, Topic Three: Enabling the Autistic Person* and *Topic Three: Positive Outcomes for the Autistic Person.* Although different expectations in each, all three topics run through each part of the standards. It is evident that each topic is a follow on from the previous, and that to enable the subsequent topic to be successful, the previous one must be completed to a high standard. Almost like a process should be followed if the expectations and aims are to be achieved (See figure 3).

The aim of Topic One is to strengthen the prisons commitment in relation to making adaptations and changes to enable positive outcomes for individuals in prison. The NAS appears to identify staff training and development as a significant component in kick starting this process. Topic Two focuses more on prisons being able to successfully identify any potential barriers which may result in exclusion, isolation, or discrimination for individuals with autism. To be able to do this successfully, staff must have a good understanding and awareness of autism (Vinter and Dillon, 2023). Topic Three, which is split into two parts, focuses on how prisons can overcome these barriers to enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Taking a person-centred approach, as well as making adjustments, the standards aim to ensure that a continuous reflective approach is taken, with the views of individuals with autism included.

*Figure 3: Visual representation of the flow of each topic within the NAS Prison Standards*



### 4.2.2 Content of the Prison Standards

The purpose of the standards it to increase positive outcomes for individuals with autism, in prison. To achieve this, processes must take place, such as staff training and development, reasonable adjustments, shared good practice, and improved communication between services.

#### *4.2.2.1 Staff training and development*

As stated above, the standards refer to staff training and development as a key component across all parts of the prison, thus making it a continuous topic under each part of the standards. The standards refer to the "Induction & Training Programme" and how this should prepare all new staff to appropriately support individuals with autism. For over a decade, recommendations have been made for all new staff to receive 'disability awareness training' (HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2009) often suggesting that those "staff whose roles require it", taking priority (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021:6). Within the standards, it appears as though an entire system approach is being suggested, with training and development of staff being prominent in all three parts. This appears to highlight the importance of all prison staff receiving autism specific training, a recommendation that slightly differs from that of HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons (2009), who appear to suggest training that couple disabilities together, which can cause confusion.

Words such as 'strategies' and 'approaches' are used, indicating that particular ways of dealing with situations, or implementing specified plans can increase positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The NAS suggests that training should include information about potential triggers/barriers to full inclusion and how staff can successfully overcome these, by putting adaptations in place and dealing with situations appropriately. Such words suggest that once barriers have been identified, adjustments and accommodations can be made, with the aim that specified approaches becoming standard practice. Vinter and Dillon (2023) advocate for greater awareness of autism amongst prison staff, stating that introducing autism awareness training is an 'example of a reasonable adjustment in-line with the autism accreditation standards. A reasonable adjustment is a legal duty placed upon prisons to ensure disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage. The standards do not imply that the induction training, as well as continuous professional development, is considered as a reasonable adjustment, but instead appear to suggest a change or adaptation to 'the norm'.

One suggestion which was repeated under all three parts of the standards, referred to staff using "books, journals and e-learning" to develop their knowledge and understanding. Using a range of training materials to continuously develop their knowledge and understanding of autism, can increase

positive outcomes for individuals with autism, with training opportunities being varied and diverse (Vinter and Dillon, 2023) catering for all learning styles. The standards do not make suggestions on informative materials or online courses which prisons could refer to, which may lead to prisons either not having the time to research or source such materials, or discover inappropriate, confusing, or ineffective online material or participate in courses.

The standards refer to “autism champions” as individuals who others can seek out for additional guidance, advice, and support. They state that such individuals would be “responsible for sharing information and knowledge” with other staff about appropriate strategies and approaches to support individuals with autism and would have additional training. Positive use of autism champions was highlighted in the DoH (2016) Think Autism progress report, where Askham Bryan College had introduced this in each department, concluding that having a specialist trained member of staff who students could seek out for support, reduced stress, and anxiety levels. The use of autism champions in the NAS prison standards, appears to suggest that advice and support would be given to staff, to increase their awareness and understanding which in-turn would allow them to better support individuals with autism. Although the use of autism champions can bring about positive outcomes, it could be suggested that over reliance on one individual may increase their stress levels and workload.

The most frequently used words used throughout all three parts of the standards, under staff training are ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding’ and ‘support’. Such words emphasise the goals and aims the NAS is trying to achieve by implementing the standards. All three words appear to support a social model perspective, suggesting that professionals around individuals with autism, need to become more knowledgeable, understanding, and aware if effective support is to be delivered. The guiding principles in the standards question how staff can ensure that provisions are in place to enable continuous development so that all staff have the right tools to enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

#### *4.2.2.2 Social Model Perspective*

As the NAS is a leading charity that works alongside individuals with autism to increase positive outcomes for them there is a presumption that the standards also take a social model perspective, although this is not explicitly stated. However, some of the language used does not always support a social model approach. A large part of the standards focuses on preparing staff for the induction of an individual with autism and making appropriate plans for their journey through prison. The term ‘vulnerability of autistic people’ is used, questioning whether training programmes cover such topics to

help ‘prison officers to understand’. The use of such terms can create a sense of defencelessness, ‘less-than’, and weak, in comparison to non-autistic people (Brown, 2011), a perspective which the NAS does not want to convey to new staff and well as through development courses.

Additionally, the standards also refer to individuals with autism as in need of “protection from victimisation or exploitation” creating a sense of dependency on the prison system to ‘protect’ them from others as they may become the ‘victim’. Evidence does suggest that individuals with autism are more likely to become targets due to their perceived difficulties in social interaction (Allely, 2018; Allely and Wood, 2022; Allen et al, 2007), therefore need ‘protection’. As stated previously, this perceived vulnerability creates a sense of ‘weakness’, which indirectly blames one’s disability for them being targeted, rather than exploring external barriers, such as lack of awareness amongst the prison population.

Reference is also made to training staff around the behaviour of individuals with autism, again using language which does not support a social model perspective. The standards question whether training and development opportunities include learning around “positive behaviour support that takes into account the nature of autism.” This may suggest that there is a direct link between autism and perceived negative behaviours, therefore staff should be required to undertake training on how to provide support to enable perceived ‘positive behaviour’. What is considered to be ‘positive behaviour’ is not defined, therefore such interpretations can differ within different prisons, as well as between members of staff. This can cause confusion and frustration for individuals with autism.

#### *4.2.2.3 Person-Centred Planning*

Including individuals with autism, in making decisions that affect their lives, is paramount, as they are experts on their own experiences and needs (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2021). Additionally, seeking their opinions and views can support the improvement of services and develop future provisions, creating better outcomes for such individuals. The NAS standards promote a reflective practice, with principles relating to obtaining feedback from individuals with autism to help improve provision. Reflective practice runs through all parts of the standards, asking how “feedback is actively sought from each autistic person”, however this could be perceived as reactive rather than proactive. The opinions of individuals with autism are sought after the provision has already been implemented, rather than during the design stage. Vinter and Dillon (2023) are passionate about the involvement of individuals with autism in the development of training programmes, stating that without such involvement, their needs or experiences may not be reflected or learnt from. The development of provisions, resources and

policies may benefit from involvement of individuals with autism from the early stage, rather than, as the NAS states, gaining feedback once things are implemented.

Across all three parts of the standards, there appears to be a large focus on well-being and caring for individuals with autism. The standards highlight how an individual's well-being is considered at every aspect of their prison journey, including induction, through education as well as when accessing health services. They query how prisons identify situations or factors which may affect well-being, such as through "timely and accurate assessments" which can then help reduce stress and anxiety. Identifying potential barriers appears to be a proactive approach to improving positive outcomes for individuals with autism, as prisons are building upon their knowledge and understanding to remove barriers which potentially may cause upset, frustration, stress, or anxiety. Additionally, the standards also refer to continuously improving mental well-being by allowing the "autistic person to pursue personal interests, hobbies or skills". Stephenson et al (2020) stress the importance of individuals in prison having opportunities to participate in activities which are of interest to them, as this can reduce stress, anxiety, and frustration levels.

#### *4.2.2.4 Communication and information sharing*

Information sharing amongst professionals across all aspects of the prison is vital and can improve positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The NAS standards promote this whole-system approach, with guiding principles asking how this is 'demonstrated', 'shown' and 'recorded'. How this occurs is left to interpretation by prisons, however the NAS are clear that evidence must be "shown and recorded" that staff are becoming more aware, making adjustments, listening to individuals with autism as well as "demonstrate that collaborative work has taken place." NHS England (2021) state that by keeping up-to-date records and information, it allows healthcare professionals to make appropriate reasonable adjustments. For these records to be accurate and kept relevant, they must be updated regularly. The NAS makes no specific reference to a reviewing process of any recorded, documented, or shared information, including that relating to healthcare services, however they do continuously query how "feedback from each autistic person has influenced future practice and provision."

#### *4.2.2.5 Awareness and Understanding*

The inclusion and equality of individuals with autism are a core aim of the introduction of the standards, highlighting how this can be achieved when staff are more aware and knowledgeable of autism. The lexical choice of cognition and processing terms, such as 'understand', 'supported' and 'prepared' saturates within the standards. These terms imply a process needing to be undertaken by prisons if

positive outcomes are to be achieved. Each word can be interpreted differently, with factors such as cognition, attitude and perception impacting it. Nevertheless, it is evident that the NAS expects prisons to support individuals with autism to understand what is expected of them, their rights, and available services, to prepare them for prison life and release. It can be argued that if an individual is aware and understands expectations, due to it being delivered in an accessible format, they are more likely to be successful. Guiding principles in the NAS standards queries how prisons ensure that "each autistic person is prepared in advance" or how each "autistic person is enabled to understand" in relation to decisions and services which affect their lives.

The word 'supported' is also another term used a great deal throughout the standards, emphasising that staff are required to assist individuals with autism to manage with prison life and the challenges it poses. Effective and appropriate support is key to positive outcomes being achieved; however, prison staff need to be aware of what is considered 'good support'. In their research, Vinter et al (2020) highlighted how many individuals with autism referred to good support as 'staff who understood them' resulting in fewer misunderstandings and altercations. Staff's understanding and awareness is consistently highlighted as a key component within the NAS standards, suggesting that increased awareness and knowledge can help individuals with autism better understand what is being asked of them, due to their needs being considered. Although there is no clear definition of what the NAS considers to be good support, it can be presumed based on the guiding principles that a greater awareness and understanding of autism can promote a more supportive environment.

The standards promote an inclusive environment, implying that individuals with autism should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers. This is in-line with the Equality Act 2010 and The Children and Families Act 2014. However, the guiding principle within the standards appears to suggest that assessments and potential interventions may be required to "support them in working alongside other prisoners." There is no reference of supporting the prison population to become more aware of autism or how they can best work alongside individuals with autism. This may be considered a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010, as assessments are carried out to identify what level of support is required to access learning that is available. However, it could be suggested that instead, it places responsibility on individuals with autism to make changes to enable them to 'fit in' with the rest of the prison community.

#### *4.2.2.6 Reasonable adjustments*

Although the term 'reasonable adjustments' is only referred to three times, the general consensus of the standards implies that adjustments should be made consistently and be built into everyday practice. For example, guiding principles in the standards question "how the autistic person is consulted" regarding personal information that affects their lives, or how prison staff ensure that they "know of and apply effective ways to communicate with each autistic person". The Equality Act 2010 s.20(6), places a legal obligation on all public bodies, including prisons, to ensure that all information shared is accessible and provided in a format which is understood by all. Although not explicit, principles such as this above, imply that adjustments need to be made to staff's communication skills to ensure that information is shared appropriately and is not misunderstood or misinterpreted, in-line with their legal duties. The use of visual aids, fewer words or more processing time would all be beneficial here, and although the NAS does not identify such examples, once staff are more aware of autism, the expectation is they would have more knowledge on the types of adjustments which would be beneficial for each person. This suggests that the standards are not explicit enough and leave room for a lot of interpretations from prisons. This could result in confusion, misunderstandings, or frustrations from prison staff who are trying to implement adjustments but are unsure of the most effective way to do this.

Information sharing and professionals communicating is vital if a whole system approach is to work collaboratively to support an individual's holistic development. This is something the NAS standards promote, with guiding principles ensuring prior information is obtained, and is clearly shared. The standards query how prisons obtain relevant information relating to an individual's needs upon induction, stating "are people asking if they have a diagnosis of autism or Asperger syndrome" (NAS Prison Standards). Although this may be perceived as a quick way of obtaining valuable information, it may be ineffective due to individuals with autism not being able to disclose such information due to communication barriers (NAS, 2022; Vinter et al, 2020) or not wanting to disclose such information to unfamiliar individuals. Additionally, evidence from HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2022) highlights how numerous prisons held public interviews with new arrivals, reducing the possibility of them disclosing personal information. Nevertheless, the standards do query how "it is demonstrated that arrival and induction procedures are designed to take into account the possibility of autism" (NAS Prison Standards). This could imply that adjustments at the induction stage may be required for individuals suspected of having autism, but this would entail an effective training programme for all staff to enable them to identify certain characteristics quickly and successfully, something the NAS are also passionate about.

The NAS also refers to adaptations and adjustments in relation to the physical environment and meeting the emotional and sensory needs of individuals with autism. Guiding principles question how the prison accommodates and supports individuals to "self-regulate sensory input", this time giving examples such as "wearing ear defenders or being able to retreat to a quiet place". Vinter and Dillon (2023) express how small adjustments can often enable greater outcomes for individuals with autism. Often such adjustments are cost effective and can be implemented quickly and easily, reducing stress and anxiety. As stated previously, the NAS are passionate about including autism awareness training in the induction training programme, enabling all new staff to have greater knowledge and awareness prior to starting their new role. The NAS queries whether the programme details and explains to new starters "what may cause an autistic person to experience stress or anxiety within a prison setting, including sensory over-load or changes in routine" as well as questioning what approaches and strategies staff are given to overcome such difficult situations. Being aware of what environmental factors may affect the sensory needs of an individual with autism, enables prison staff to put reasonable adjustments into place quickly. Again, the NAS are not explicit in detailing this in the standards, but it can be suggested through the guiding principles that staff should themselves be more aware and be putting such things into place. Prisons may find this challenging without explicit guidance.

#### *4.2.2.7 Educational Progression*

One third of the standards focuses primarily on learning and development of skills. Reference to learning, employability skills, training and qualification are all made, highlighting the importance of education, as a whole, in the rehabilitative journey of individuals with autism. This does mirror the government's aim for prison education (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022) asserting that good quality education that is accessible for all, is the key to a successful rehabilitation (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a). However, what is absent from the NAS standards is the importance of purposeful activity and life skills, in relation to developing skills, knowledge and learning. Under the Care and Custody part of the standards, guiding principles question "how is each autistic person enabled to access a sufficient quantity of purposeful activities that enhance their self-esteem and improve their wellbeing?" This does mirror Stephenson et al (2020) research, where they argued that purposeful activities within prisons does promote a positive mental well-being, as individuals are participating in activities which are of interest to them, reducing stress and anxiety. Although encouraging and supporting a positive mental well-being is vital for individuals in prison, it can be suggested that purposeful activity can also be linked to development of skills, learning, and enhancing knowledge. Bigger emphasis could have been placed on this within the

standards, promoting a more inclusive, diverse, curriculum, which is adaptive to suit the individual needs of individuals with autism and their learning styles. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Additionally, it has been suggested that life skills are sometimes covered under 'employability skills' (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022), allowing individuals in prison to be prepared for life outside of prison. Again, this approach fails to acknowledge those individuals who may never be able to obtain employment but still need support to be prepared for life after release (The Education Committee, 2002a). The standards question "how is each autistic person involved in setting clearly defined and achievable learning goals that take into account their challenges, as well as their interests, strengths, wishes, future plans and ambitions?" This appears to promote a person-centred approach, however they fail to recognise the basic life skills that some individuals may be missing, such as telling the time, learning the months of the year etc. Skills like this may not be present on the curriculum as generally the expectation is that adults should already know and understand such topics, however this is not always the case.

The Learning and Skills part does make specific reference to "relevant qualifications" and "employability skills", which can promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism and can enhance their chances of success upon release. However, focusing education primarily on these aspects fails to acknowledge those individuals who do not have this as their priority, or may struggle to successfully access this. For a variety of factors, individuals with autism and others in prison, may not have obtained qualifications when of compulsory school age (MOJ, 2021; House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a)), therefore when entering prison, education may still present a barrier due to negative experiences. Having an awareness and understanding of this, amongst all prison staff, can enable adjustments to be put into place, and alternatives to learning be offered. The NAS does stress, numerous times throughout this part, that learning should be "enjoyable" and "motivating" and this is left open to interpretation for prisons, as it is expected that staff know the people they are supporting and can tailor person-centred learning around them.

#### *4.2.2.8 Relationships*

The relationships between individuals in prison and staff has been identified as one of the most fundamental aspects of a successful prison system (Liebling et al, 2010, Crewe, 2011). Although it is well documented that social interaction can be challenging for individuals with autism, the desire to experience positive relationships and strong bonds is still present (Vinter et al, 2020) and should be

encouraged and supported by knowledgeable and understanding people. The NAS standards do slightly notice this important aspect, referring to additional training for “other people, including listeners, mentors and equalities reps”. Although the NAS is not specific in detailing whether this refers to peer mentoring or staff, both can be important relationships for individuals with autism in prison. Evidence from HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021) highlight how many prisons within their research discovered that peer mentoring offered invaluable emotional support, as well as assisting with everyday tasks which helped individuals with autism have a positive day. Considering how vital relationships, both peer and staff, can be to individuals with autism in prison, it did not appear to be reflected within the NAS standards.

### 4.2.3 Concluding reflections on Document Analysis

As outlined in the introduction, the purpose of this document analysis was to identify and gain a greater understanding of the aims and expectations of the NAS Autism Accreditation Prison Standards, using this to inform the semi-structured interviews conducted. Three topics run through each part of the standards, suggesting that the NAS believe these are the underlying components in supporting prisons to take steps in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Although some of the language used does not appear to support a social model perspective, this does not remove the overarching objective. It is vital that individuals with autism are involved and included in all aspects of their prison journey, developing, and reviewing policies, provisions and adjustments being put in place to support their success. The standards do appear to support a person-centred approach; however, a numerous guiding principles suggest a reactive approach, asking for feedback, rather than involvement from individuals with autism.

The standards appear to act as guidance, with very few explicit definitions or examples that prisons can refer to. The idea that a prison feels they require additional support from the NAS to assist them in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism, but then are not provided with specific examples on adjustments, adaptations and good practice that could be implemented may leave some prisons and staff struggling to know and understand what is for the best, and most effective. Reasonable adjustments are not referred to often throughout the standards, but instead reference is made to certain aspects of the prison environment and its regime that staff need to consider, however, what is required to consider this is knowledge and awareness of autism. Only then can barriers to full inclusions be achieved. Prisons applying for accreditation may not initially have this knowledge and awareness.

Obtaining the standards is the start of a long process for prisons, which involves hard work and dedication. Although I believe the standards are not explicit enough or offer specific examples which prisons can relate to, the guiding principles do encourage prisons to query and reflect upon their own practice, in the hope that they can discover what works for whom, why and how. Having this can allow prisons to make continuous development and work toward removing barriers which for all individuals with autism.

## 4.3 Interviews with Programme Architects: Findings and Discussion

### 4.3.1 Introduction

Analysis of the prison standards document highlighted the core aim for its development; to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism in prison. Interviews with its programme architects aims to explore this on a greater level, exploring why such standards were required, how they were developed as well as gain a greater insight into the aims and expectations of prisons. Although there are three key themes that shape the standards, many more guiding principles are apparent, all of which shaped the semi-structured interviews conducted. These interviews are discussed and analysed in greater detail in this chapter and its outcomes helped shape the design and guiding principles of Phase Two of this study.

### 4.3.2 Development of The NAS Prison Standards

Both Annie and Barney began by explaining how successful the NAS Autism Accreditation Programme has been in community services such as hospitals, schools, and NHS Trusts. Internet searches display numerous services proudly highlighting their success in gaining accreditation, with one educational setting recently gaining Advanced Status for a second time (NAS, 2023b). They refer to their dedication in providing specialist support for individuals with autism, offering a tailored curriculum, encompassing performing arts and creativity (NAS, 2023b). The NAS (2024) are passionate about ensuring appropriate support is provided for individuals with autism and when a service gains accreditation status, it highlights the hard work and dedication they have for providing such excellent support. Excellent within this context would be defined by the NAS, who accredit the prison. No individuals with autism are involved in the decision making, however, are interviewed as part of the process. Autism Accreditation has been implemented for over 30 years, however, prisons did not become involved in the programme until 2015, when the NAS began developing suitable and purposeful standards for such establishments (Lewis et al, 2015). Prior to this, Annie states there was evidence of good practice. She gives an example of one prison making adjustments to meet individual needs, highlighting how:

"They [prison staff] allowed him to eat his dinner in his cell, on his own, when he was having a bad day. He struggled to tell them it was a bad day, but they had learnt to recognise certain behaviours and quickly intervened before it escalated."

Quick and simple adjustments such as this can result in positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Annie also states how prisons were noticing that improvements can be made to better support individuals with autism. She reports how HMP & YOI Feltham, the leading prison in supporting the development of the standards, wanted to complete an audit of their "autism service, which they have had since around 2012. It is mainly around diagnosis so they are able to diagnose the young lads there and they can also provide post-diagnostic support, and they also provide statutory assessments for individuals". Such examples indicate that pockets of good practice amongst the prison service did exist prior to the NAS involvement, however, minimal guidance and advice may have been offered to ensure this became enriched in daily support.

In their article, Lewis et al (2015) give examples of the 'original standards' and explained how three out of four of them were taken from pre-existing services within the community and amended slightly to reflect prisons. These were: mental health, primary care, and education. The fourth original standard was 'discipline' and focused on the prison rules, process, and physical environment, taking into account the impact these may have on individuals with autism in their day-to-day lives (Lewis et al, 2015). However, Barney explained how the original standards were subsequently deemed ineffective as they "focused too much on processes rather than outcomes … we wanted to shift more to a person-centred model" creating standards that would be effective in both adult and young people prisons. Although Barney did not disclose what specific changes were made to the standards, when questioned, he did state that no individuals with autism were present or involved in the designing and development of the standards. This does not necessarily promote a person-centred programme but instead could be argued that it instils a power imbalance (Barnes and Mercer, 2004) as professionals appear to be making policies and guidance on how best to meet individual needs, without including the individuals whose needs are trying to be met.

Prisons are establishments which were designed to deprive people of their liberty, as a way of punishment (Metz, 2022) although have sometimes been described as 'too soft' (Morrison and Maycock, 2021). In their research on new prison officers, Morrison and Maycock (2021) highlight how a significant percentage believed that the prison community lacked firmness around individual's privileges, suggesting that creating a pleasant environment with free access to a large range of facilities,

does not deter individuals from committing crimes. In her interview, Annie stated that the overall aim when producing the standards was to "make life easier for autistic prisoners by giving staff the tools to have more knowledge and understanding on how best to support such people when in prison." Although Annie suggests that life should be made 'easier' for individuals with autism in prison, and Vinter et al (2020:16) appears to make a similar conclusion, stating that reasonable adjustments should be made to "improve life for autistic residents", this could be interpreted as ensuring that difficulties associated with autism are not heightened due to the prison establishment. Put bluntly, individuals with autism should not find prison any more stressful than other individuals for reasons relating to their diagnosis. Therefore, prison life is not being made 'easier' for such individuals, instead it is ensuring that it is not harder for reasons relating to their autism. This aligns with the purpose and role of the **reasonable adjustment's** duty**.**

Training and continuous development of staff is a significant theme and runs through each of the prison standards. Both Barney and Annie stress the importance of staff training, highlighting how it can enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Barney stated that "everything has to start with training and professional development and there has to be a commitment from the prisons to providing that training." Barney appears to suggest that for positive outcomes to be achieved for individuals with autism, training of staff must be implemented; training = positive outcomes. Examples within the standards of what 'staff training' should look like or incorporate are not provided, leaving prisons open to interpretation. Furthermore, Barney appears to not acknowledge the importance of staff attitudes, beliefs and engagement, and the impact these can have in terms of training; all of which could affect their ability to enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Preconceived notions about individuals in prison does have the potential to hinder one's ability to successfully provide effective support. This was evident in Morrison and Maycock's (2021) study, where they identified that some officer recruits had perceived the job to be 'dangerous' and 'violent' with the use of power and force being used often, affecting their approach to individuals in prison. Morrison and Maycock (2021) did, however, highlight a significant number of individuals who after their training and some experience in the role, had changed their views, realising how individuals in prison are not always 'the bad guys' but instead people who have made mistakes and deserve a chance to rehabilitate. Annie believes this is the ideal form of training, "staff should be reflective and learn through experience."

Annie refers to training as, "increasing your knowledge and your understanding of autism". The impact this would have on individuals with autism could be significantly positive. Referring to Morrison and

Maycock's (2021) study on the training of new recruits, they highlighted how perceptions had changed during their training, signifying the impact development courses such as this are vital in establishing a prison community that wants to create a **positive change**. To achieve this, training needs to be centred around personal experiences, developing skills, finding workable solutions and problem solving, especially in an environment such as a prison.

Annie suggests that training can be accomplished in several ways. She refers to online training, classroom-based training as well as reflective training, concluding that "it needs to be flexible and suit the prison and its prisoners … more importantly it needs to be continuous." Barney agrees, suggesting that finding alternative ways of training staff is vital in prisons as, "in order to train staff using the preferred method of classroom-based training, you have to do a lockdown … you end up cancelling activities and locking prisoners in their cells." Catch 22; cancel and make changes to the routine to learn how to effectively support individuals with autism. Nevertheless, both Annie and Barney agree that all staff who work within prisons should have some level of autism awareness training, and this should be incorporated into induction/mandatory training provided at the start of their prison officer journey. This is highlighted within the standards, with part one referring to the induction and training programme for new staff. Although this is positive and allows all staff to learn and develop their knowledge of autism, it does raise concerns about the staff who are already working with prisons and their ability to also access such learning and development opportunities. Annie does recognise the barriers with training during induction, questioning its effectiveness when rushed. She states, "there's so much mandatory training that they have to do that they're not even getting through that, let alone the autism training, and when they do, they've probably had enough and their heads about to explode." Nevertheless, it has been previously highlighted how prison staff do wish to receive disability awareness training, but it is not always readily available (Loucks and Talbot, 2007). To successfully meet individual needs, training needs to go beyond awareness, and should aspire to create an understanding, develop skills, and learn from experiences. With specific prevalence rates of individuals with autism unknown, providing in-house specific training can be beneficial and help produce positive outcomes, yet does prove difficult in a under resourced and underfunded system (Robertson and McGillivray, 2015).

Throughout the development of the standards, Annie and Barney discussed the limitations they faced and still do today. Although prisons are required to ensure reasonable adjustments are made to promote equality, fairness, and inclusion, what is considered as 'reasonable' can be interpreted differently by different prisons. Annie discusses how one prison allowed an individual with autism and

sensory sensitivities to wear sunglasses inside, adjusting the prison's rules and policies. Barney gave an example of one prison adapting their meals, supporting individuals' sensory diets. Both provide insights into how prison governors interpret 'reasonableness' and adapt to suit the needs of those within their prison. Evaluating what adjustments are right for the individuals in each prison can present challenges for governors, especially when coupled with legal obligations and consequently, some individuals with autism may go unmissed, unsupported, or unrecognised. Annie stated, "when writing the standards, we had to make sure that our expectations were in line with prison legal duties, because what was written in the community standards, prisons wouldn't always legally be allowed to follow." Barney highlighted similar limitations, concluding that "it took us a while to figure out what standards worked best and could be implemented across all prisons without it becoming a legal battle." Although neither participant gave in-depth explanations as to what aspects of the old standards did or did not work, Barney did state how he felt there is now more focus on "well-being and care" of individuals with autism rather than "the process of reasonable adjustments". This could be interpreted as though the first draft of the standards gave more attention to changes and adaptations, rather than promoting a culture of knowledge and awareness which would allow prisons to support the holistic needs of individuals with autism, implementing adjustments and appropriately being able to evaluate and review their effectiveness. Both participants explained how working alongside HMP & YOI Feltham helped make expectations achievable for prisons.

### 4.3.3 Aims and Expectations

Throughout both interviews, several aims and expectations placed upon prisons that participate in the programme were discussed. Although the overarching aim is to produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism, smaller aims, and expectations to achieve this were highlighted by both participants.

#### *4.3.3.1 Positive outcomes for individuals with autism in prison*

Both Annie and Barney explained how the overall aim of the programme is to increase positive outcomes for individuals with autism in prison. Barney stated that he felt the purpose of developing the standards was to "help prisons do better with supporting autistic offenders" by giving staff the "right tools to know how to meet individual needs", referring to a wide range of training opportunities, enthusiastic staff, and a supportive environment. Annie echoed this, suggesting that "better outcomes for autistic offenders" was the primary goal for developing and introducing the programme within prisons. Annie goes on to imply that 'better outcomes' can be measured by a reduction in re-offending;

"we want people to be successfully rehabilitated and not come back into prison upon release". This supports the aims of the government, outlined in the HM Government (2021) Autism Strategy, where they call for more prisons to work alongside the NAS to promote a more autism-friendly environment, enhancing positive outcomes for such individuals. To date, alongside HMP & YOI Feltham, an additional four prisons have gained accreditation, with one now having obtained 'advanced accreditation'. Fourteen other prisons are still currently working towards their goal of better supporting individuals with autism (MOJ, 2023).

#### *4.3.3.2 Staff development*

In her interview Annie discussed that to achieve the overall aim, the programme initially needed to support prisons and staff to become more aware, knowledgeable, and confident in supporting individuals with autism. She states, "it's about instilling that confidence in staff and training is a big part of that … however even with training there are still some good officers that can doubt their judgment." Confidence across prison staff was previously highlighted as a concern in McAdam (2012) study, where it was discovered that many officers felt ill-equipped in effectively supporting individuals with autism. Focusing on knowledge and understanding of 53 members of staff, with a variety of job roles across the prison, McAdam (2012) concluded that a significant number of staff were unaware whether they had ever supported an individual with autism, highlighting the lack of awareness and in some cases, communication, amongst the prison community. Although staff training is fundamental in providing them with knowledge to better support individuals with autism, it is only one aspect of a holistic approach. More attention and recognition need to be given to experience, upskilling of individuals as well as the sharing of good practice and acknowledgement of achievement; all which can increase confidence amongst prison staff.

In their research, Loucks and Talbot (2007) discovered that a lot of disability specific training was targeted at professionals in certain roles, such as healthcare. This was echoed by Annie, who suggested that this results in many staff, across the prison, being unable to appropriately support individuals with autism. She argued that there currently is a reliance on "somebody in healthcare, even when it's not health support, that they require." The reliance on specific professionals to be 'experts' can cause delays in obtaining the correct support and implementing appropriate interventions. Often, such individuals are not always knowledgeable enough to offer guidance and support. Barney stresses the importance of all staff within the prison community being involved in autism training, stating, "all staff need to be aware of how to meet individual needs so that if they come across somebody with autism, they can support

them." Having too few staff who are aware and confident in supporting individuals with autism may result in additional pressures for such staff, unmet needs due to time constraints, as well as segregation/isolation; an 'out of sight out of mind' mentality. Consequently, such individuals may then be regularly surrounded by staff who can effectively support them. Barney concludes that "currently, it's those who are trained that are left to deal with autistic offenders."

#### *4.3.3.3 Introduction of Autism Champions*

Myers (2004:111) has previously championed having a designated 'autism expert' across services, including prisons, suggesting that this would "increase awareness and improve early identification." Although Barney advocates for all staff to be involved in training, indicating that supporting individuals with autism is everybody's responsibility, Annie does discuss the desire to introduce "autism champions" in all prisons. She states that the overall aim of such individuals would be to provide, "information to colleagues … and provide an opportunity for colleagues to go to them … for me that's training." Although it can be suggested as extremely beneficial to prisons, having knowledgeable staff who can offer advice and guidance to the rest of the team quickly, it does raise concerns around the pressure, stress, and expectations of such individuals, especially if prevalence rates within prison are unknown but expected to be higher than recognised (HMI of Prisons and HMI of Probations, 2021). Even with all staff participating in autism specific training, it still does raise concerns around how much autism champions will be relied on to make decisions and offer advice and guidance and what this means in relation to increasing all staff's confidence around supporting individuals.

What was noticeable within the standards and then during interviews, was the minimal reference and emphasis placed on individuals with autism acting as mentors and offering peer support to other individuals with autism. Annie did appear to suggest that peer support does happen for individuals with autism, referring to an individual with autism who was struggling in prison and the support his cell mate provided. Referencing his words, Annie states,

> "This guy is in healthcare at the moment, he just isn't coping at all, even his cellmate sent a letter to this guy's mum. This guy had asked him, this guy can't read or write, so he asked him to write a letter to his mum and because he couldn't read he didn't even know what he had written, but at the end his cellmate said, 'you know I've not told him I'm writing this but he's really not coping in here, I'm leaving soon and I'm worried about him when I've gone'. He tried to connect him with other people who he thinks might help him and support him once this guy has gone but this is just an awful situation, and his

mum is saying ‘what do I do? How do I get him into another prison? How do I move to one that’s working towards accreditation?”

Although this is a positive example of where non-disabled people can provide peer support for individuals with autism in prison, something that should be encouraged across all prisons, there is still a need for individuals with autism participating in this role themselves. Disabled people are considered experts of their own experiences and needs (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2021), therefore could offer invaluable knowledge, stemming from personal and lived experiences.

#### *4.3.3.4 Improved Communication and information sharing*

As well as instilling confidence amongst the prison community, both Barney and Annie also stated that better communication is an important aim when implementing the standards. Barney stressed that prisons are like a “small village … services such as education, healthcare, work, just everything, should all be working together, just like in the community.” Collaboration between all services for individuals with autism is vital, especially if needs are to be met effectively (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2018). This goes beyond the prison walls, with community and probation services also needing to take a person-centred approach to plan effective support. This was a key recommendation occurring from Hollomotz and Talbot’s (2018) seminar report, highlighting how a joined-up approach across all aspects of the justice system can enable positive outcomes for individuals with autism. They refer to Gary, an individual who was released into the community with minimal support and subsequently failed the terms of his licence. Upon reflection, it was identified that the lack of communication and collaborative working amongst services in prison as well as within the community resulted in Garry not receiving effective support to enable him to be successful. Once this was recognised and services began to work together to make a person-centred plan, it resulted in positive outcomes for Garry, which included finding suitable housing where he could develop his self-care skills and begin to form positive relationships. This case study highlights the importance of effective communication and collaboration between all services who support individuals with autism, yet HM Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2023) still report the unsatisfactory number of prisons where important information regarding individual’s care and support needs are not being passed on to appropriate people. Prisons working alongside the NAS to create better outcomes for individuals with autism are supported to find quicker and more accessible ways of collaborating and sharing vital information to ensure individuals receive the care, attention and support they require to be successful (NAS, 2024). As Annie states, “staff need to talk! Talking means

sharing experiences, which can be learnt from, but also vital information which can help make autistic offenders lives easier in prison."

#### *4.3.3.5 Adjustments and accommodations*

Annie states that all prisons who participate in the programme would be expected to provide reasonable adjustments, in line with the Equality Act 2010, to enable them to produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism. As referenced prior in this chapter, Annie detailed how one prison made adjustments for an individual with sensory difficulties, particularly with light, who "prior to coming into prison would wear sunglasses all day, inside and outside … and he wasn't allowed to have the blinds down in the day … it was really difficult for him to cope." When in prison, rules such as these can ignite the challenges individuals with autism face, therefore providing cost effective adjustments could help produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Vinter and Dillon (2023) express how small adjustments can produce greater outcomes, giving examples such as using a person-centred approach to find jobs which may be less busy, using visual timetables or allowing transition to be at quieter times. Such adjustments are all cost effective and can be implemented easily and quickly. Additionally, taking a person-centred approach allows individual needs to be met more successfully. Having trained, confident and knowledgeable staff across the prison, working collaboratively to identify and recognise potential triggers and quickly introduce adjustments, can support positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

#### *4.3.3.6 Inclusive Educational and Rehabilitation opportunities*

Another aim was that the prisons involved would become better at providing **rehabilitative and educational courses**, appropriate for individuals with autism. Although Barney recognised that prisons are required to cater for individuals with a variety of educational backgrounds, he does emphasize the importance of ensuring that the course delivered is accessible; "if autistic offenders cannot access such courses, then how are they meant to prove they have rehabilitated? … their days will be meaningless as they will not have anything to do or keep them stimulated." Even if courses were accessible for all, outcomes for everyone will be different, as other factors, such as engagement, previous education, and health inequalities, need to be considered. Nevertheless, education in prison is viewed as playing a significant role in addressing offending behaviours and learning new skills ready for release, in the hope of reducing reoffending. As previously highlighted, Annie wants to support individuals with autism to have a successful rehabilitation and not return to prison. This is a core outcome expressed by the MOJ (2021) who continuously emphasise that the key to a successful rehabilitation is through education. If

individuals with autism are to be successful, barriers and challenges need to be identified, address and removed.

#### *4.3.3.7 Effective Support*

Finally, both Annie and Barney, throughout their interviews, stress that the overall purpose is for individuals with autism to receive the most effective and appropriate support, enabling them to leave prison and make positive choices. Annie defines this as staff having "a better understanding of what their [individuals with autism] difficulties are …. Then it means that the outcomes are going to be much better". Barney agrees, highlighting how effective support must "be person-centred with their needs being at the heart of the plan." However, Barney did display signs of concern when discussing a supportive environment for individuals with autism. He states, "what we don't want to do is make it so good that autistic offenders want to stay in prison, but then again that's a good thing, proving what the prison is providing is meeting their needs." Although it is positive that individuals with autism feel supported when in prison, the real issue with any potential re-offending may be the lack of community services available for such people. This was highlighted in Murphy et al (2017:965) study on what happens to individuals with intellectual disabilities upon release from prison, stating that from the 38 participants, "over half had been in contact with the police since leaving prison". Murphy et al (2017) called for improved community support for individuals upon leaving prison, making it compulsory that social care is involved in the planning, prior to release. As stated previously, a collaborative approach can support a smooth transition into the community, allowing for appropriate services to offer guidance and support.

### 4.3.4 Prison Standards

As analysed in detail earlier in this chapter, the final standards cover three parts: *Custody and Care, Learning and Skills, and Health Services.* Both participants discussed all three parts at length, with key themes emerging on how they feel the standards should be interpreted and implemented by the prisons participating.

#### *4.3.4.1 Care and Custody*

This part focuses on the support available from the moment an individual enters the justice system as well as the continued support they receive throughout their prison journey. Barney discusses the importance of trained staff at the induction process, "knowing what to say and what to do as soon as an autistic offender enters prison can be important as this is the stage that sets them up for prison." Both participants explained how at the induction stage, individuals are given a lot of information about prison

and their expectations, most of which is provided in a lengthy written format. Annie states that this information "should be given to them [individuals with autism] in an accessible formation, that is still legally binding" and that staff should be able to "seek understanding from that." In his research on individuals with hearing impairments, McCulloch (2012) discovered how all participants highlighted the induction stage as problematic due to communication difficulties. Participants described how this stage was extremely stressful due to it being inaccessible for them, resulting in key information being missed. Although McCulloch (2012) participant's needs may be different from the needs of individuals with autism, the lack of accessible formats provided to ensure information is understood is evident. Trained staff, at every stage of the justice system could help identify individuals with autism, allowing them to confidently provide information in an accessible format, such as obtaining an appropriate adult, using visual aids, allowing processing time or sharing only key information required at that time, reducing 'information overload'. This could make the induction process less stressful for such individuals.

#### *4.3.4.2 Learning and Skills*

Part two of the standards focuses on the learning and development of skills. Annie states that "this means both autistic offenders and the staff too, as everybody in the prison environment must continue to learn and develop." For individuals with autism, the standards focus on them being fully included in making decisions about the learning and education they receive, taking control of their own progression. Then, as Annie states, "prisons should accommodate the autistic offender by making reasonable adjustments to make them be included." It has previously been concluded that a lot of rehabilitation and educational programmes in prison are not accessible for individuals with autism (Lewis et al, 2015; Roberton and McGillivray, 2015). Talbot (2008) previously highlighted how prisons can often create barriers for individuals with an IQ lower than 80, as many activities, courses and programmes are unavailable and inaccessible. Such programmes may also be inaccessible for individuals with autism, and this can lead to them displaying perceived negative behaviours, because of boredom or frustration (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2014). Robertson and McGillivray (2015) echoed this, stating that many individuals with autism find themselves stuck in a system that does not fully understand their needs and due to the lack of appropriate educational provisions they are detained longer. The NAS recognises this and are committed to improving the educational opportunities for individuals with autism because as Annie states, "we believe that it gives their day purpose which helps make prisons that little less stressful."

The development of staff was also a high priority for both participants and is a common theme throughout all three standards. As stated previously, Annie and Barney believe that classroom-based courses are not aways suitable and feasible, therefore finding alternative ways to learn and develop is vital. Annie states that one way to develop knowledge is by “speaking directly to colleagues.” This type of peer support can increase confidence as well as share good practice that can better meet individual needs. Coley (2016) concluded similar opinions. Focusing his study on reflective practice for prison staff, he explored their views on training, what it meant to them and the importance of it. He discovered that many officers struggled to find the time or space to undertake reflective practice due to the pressures of their workload. However, all participants in his study stated that a form of ‘peer group’ with opportunities to learn from each other could be highly beneficial. By discussing the needs of individuals with autism, amongst themselves, prison staff can learn effective strategies from each other as well as become more aware of potential triggers, to help avoid these. Often this type of learning can be more beneficial than a classroom-based training course. Annie does appear to make similar conclusions, suggesting that prison officers “need experience and that’s what a lot of these prison officers have and actually they are really good at making positive choices for autistic offenders. These experiences are even better when shared with others.”

#### *4.3.4.3 Healthcare*

Part three of the standards focus on healthcare. Barney states that healthcare in prison can often be split, with mental healthcare teams and physical healthcare teams operating separately, making communication and information sharing more complicated. Annie echoed this stating that “all healthcare providers within prisons need to work more closely together if needs are to be met.” The Care Quality Commission (2015) highlights how healthcare is a priority for government, as ‘vulnerabilities’ can increase when all individuals in prison are reliant on authorities for their safety, care, and well-being, regardless of a diagnosis of autism suggesting that all individuals within prison could be perceived as ‘vulnerable’. Additionally, The Care Quality Commission (2015) states that prisons should be providing healthcare that is of similar standard to that within the community, arguing that all individuals need to stay healthy and should have access to regular healthcare. Annie echoed this, stating that “you should get an appointment if you need one but it’s not always as simple as ringing the doctors, therefore they may need a little more support.” Although healthcare should be of a similar standard, accessing it is different due to the constraints of prison, therefore support around accessibility and referrals may require further investigation and support to ensure those who need healthcare can obtain it.

NHS England (2021) emphasises how individuals with autism are more prone to physical health issues, as well as being unable to access appropriate healthcare when in prison. Their vision is similar to that of Barney and Annie; a whole-system approach, where all services within the justice system as a whole, collaboratively work alongside each other to produce better outcomes for individuals with autism. One of their key aims is 'early intervention and support' discussing how at the earliest stage possible, additional needs such as autism, need to be identified so appropriate support can be implemented (NHS England, 2021). This echoes Annie and Barney's outcomes for the autism accreditation programme, with Barney stating that "being diagnosed is brilliant, however, we know this isn't always possible when in prison but being recognised as potentially having autistic traits when arriving in prison can lead people down an appropriate pathway of support". Although Annie and Barney do not elaborate further on how this can be successful, they do stress the importance of a reliable screening tool, as discussed previously in this chapter. Having an appropriate screening tool at the induction stage, reduces the pressure on staff to successfully identify all individuals with additional needs as well as promotes a fair and equal approach. This approach can also reduce the risk of individuals being missed, allowing for early intervention. Barney and Annie do state that once an individual is identified as being autistic, such information should be shared with all staff who will support them. As Annie states, Collaborative working amongst all professionals "across the prison and wider justice system can increase positive outcomes for autistic people."

Finally, both participants spoke openly about their desire for all prisons within the UK to have a diagnostic team on site, helping suspected individuals with autism gain a diagnosis quicker and offer post-diagnosis support. Annie spoke about how HMP & YOI Feltham already have a diagnostic team onsite, and this "helped the young lads gain a diagnosis of autism, as well as receive support afterwards." Annie also highlighted how this helped relieve additional stress from staff, stating that it is "also beneficial for staff as they knew who to refer individuals to when they suspected traits and could gain advice on how best to support that individual." However, both participants were realistic and understood how feasible this was. Hughes (2016) argued that getting a diagnosis can often be the difference between a successful release and a return to crime, as additional support within the community can be provided for such individuals. This was reflected Hollomotz and Talbot (2018), who suggested that often criteria to access services can vary and this can often leave individuals without support, even when an official diagnosis is obtained. Without collaborative support, including specialist healthcare professional both in prison and within the community, positive outcomes for individuals with autism may suffer.

## 4.4 Covid-19

Phase one helped build a programme theory, which shaped and was tested in Phase Two. Phase Two was completed over two visits; however, outcomes were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; something which could not have been planned for. The programme theories identified and developed in Phase One continued to be tested throughout all aspects of Phase Two, with the added analysis of the effects the pandemic had on the implementation and development of the accreditation standards.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The NAS' prison standards are a significant step forward in promoting the inclusion, understanding, awareness and acceptance of autism within mainstream prisons. Beginning with training and development of staff across the prison community, the NAS aims to create an environment where all staff have the tools which enable them to confidently support individuals with autism. Both participants in this study were passionate about providing a variety of effective training opportunities which impact staff and enable them to make positive change, this included online training, through 'autism champions', classroom based as well as regular peer support. Training and development of staff is a significant starting point to bringing about positive change, as this can impact individual attitudes and expectations. However, training can only be defined as effective if it is fulfilling its purpose; giving staff the knowledge, awareness and understanding, to support individuals confidently and successfully with autism. Staff can then only be successful if the training available is sufficient. The standards are not explicit in supporting and guiding prisons with this aspect, leaving prisons to interpret what training should be included within the induction programme, as well as continuous professional development, and how regular this occurs.

Although not often referred to, reasonable accommodations are key to enabling individuals with autism to be successful in prison. The standards almost expect staff to problem solve, identify barriers, and implement adjustments, without the NAS explicitly referring to them. Adjustments should be implemented to ensure that individuals with autism are not put at a substantial disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers, resulting in prison life being no harder for them for reasons relating to their autism. Annie and Barney believe that the standards promote this, however Barney does question whether offering 'too good' of a service may not result in the desired effect, especially if individuals with autism do not receive mirrored support within the community. Nevertheless, the NAS are passionate about collaborative working amongst all professionals within the justice system, especially those throughout the prison and parole services. In theory, this ideology would create a greater awareness

and understanding of individual needs, enabling all services to work together to provide a person-centred approach, however, as both Annie and Barney point out, this is not always successful and consequently individuals with autism suffer.

Additionally, person-centred planning can promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism, as they are experts of their own experiences and needs (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2021). The standards appear to promote this, as do Annie and Barney, suggesting that feedback should be sought from individuals with autism and their opinions should be listened to in further developing policies and practices. Reference is made to their educational pathway and how individuals with autism should be supported to make personal choices about activities that fill their day. This cannot be disputed; however, it does cause confusion to know that no individuals with autism was consulted or asked to help develop the standards; standards which will ultimately affect every aspect of their lives when in prison. Although some studies may suggest that individuals with autism may experience difficulties in decision-making (Luke et al, 2012) opportunities should not be withdrawn, but instead additional support and processing time allowed. By not involving individuals with autism within the design process, it may raise questions as to whether the standards fully appreciate the potential barriers prisons create and the effect these can have on such people.

Positive relationships have previously been identified as key in promoting a positive environment (Liebling et al, 2010), however little reference was made to how and why relationships should be made and the importance of them within the standards. Both participants in this phase identified autism champions as a successful way to reduce stress and gain additional knowledge and advice for staff. These staff-staff relationships appear to promote a positive ethos across the prison community, suggesting that those who seek such advice have the motivation and enthusiasm to provide effective support to individuals with autism. However, what appeared to be missing was the importance of staff-prisoner relationships as well as prisoner-prisoner relationships, and the effect these may have on individuals with autism. Reference in the standards was made to ‘protecting’ individuals with autism from ‘victimization’ suggesting that prisoner-prisoner relationships may be challenging to establish. Regardless, this should not discourage staff to support individuals to seek positive relationships, as these can be invaluable for individuals with autism (Vinter et al, 2020). Additionally, reference was not made to the relationships individuals with autism have with their family and friends within the community. Such relationships are vital and can contribute towards reducing re-offending.

Although the standards promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism, they appear more to be guiding principles for prisons, rather than specific advice and examples. This may lead to professionals becoming confused or overwhelmed when planning for individuals with autism and not fully understanding or knowing the most effective strategies or adjustments to implement. It will be individuals with autism who are affected the most.

### 4.5.1 Reoccurring and important themes for Phase Two

Phase One has illustrated numerous aspects of the prison standards which may prove vital in creating positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Analysing the standards, as well as discussing them at length with the programme architects created 'programme theories' which will be tested in Phase Two of this study. These have been identified and discussed within this chapter and are summarised as:

- Training and the impact of this, for the prison staff community.
- Educational and rehabilitation courses.
- Adjustments, including awareness of the physical environment and sensory sensitivities.
- Accessible information and collaborative working across services.
- Support to cope with the pressures and stress of everyday prison life.
- Relationships.

These themes/mechanisms, if implemented successfully, have been suggested by the NAS, to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism in prison. Such themes are incorporated into the semi-structured interview format used in phase Two of this study. Data from these interviews are analysed in the subsequent chapters to identify what works for whom, under what circumstances and why.

# 5.Chapter Five: Education, learning and skills in prison

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the potential role education plays in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The MOJ (2021) define positive outcomes to be a reduction in re-offending, arguing that education plays a key role in this, allowing individuals in prison to learn new skills which can enhance their chances of employment upon release. Education was a key theme throughout this thesis because it is an integral part of the NAS prison standards and was referred to frequently throughout interviews, due to it being a substantial part to an individual's day. Identifying appropriate educational pathways upon entering prison can prove vital in providing effective support, as well as encouraging individuals with autism to participate in learning.

The chapter begins by outlining this thesis' definition of education and what this entails. This slightly differs from the governments (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022; MOJ, 2021), with purposeful activity and life skills also being included. The chapter then examines the adjustments and person-centered planning undertaken in Prison AA to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Coates (2016) has previously called for adjustments to the education agenda, promoting an inclusive environment which caters for individual needs. How successful and effective Prison AA are at implementing such adjustments will be discussed. Findings from interviews with individuals with autism, as well as staff will help to identify what works for whom, under what circumstances and why.

## 5.2 Education in the context of this study

'Learning and Skills' is an integral part of the prison standards, as discussed in greater detail in chapter four of this study. The standards promote an 'inclusive educational environment' (discussed in chapter two and four), focusing on the processes which enable prisons to create positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Questions within the standards query how prisons can remove the barriers to learning and skills for individuals with autism, recognising the key role education has on personal development and rehabilitation. The standards do, to some extent, reflect the MOJ (2021) aims for education, which is to increase employability skills, however, the focus tends to be on making this accessible for individuals with autism. No specific examples of how this can be achieved is given by the NAS, leaving prisons to make decisions about what is best for the individuals they support.

This study goes beyond the prison standards and mirrors Pike and Farley (2018) clear distinction between education and vocational training. They argue that education is a form of personal growth and

development, with the purpose to learn. This can include personal growth as well as development of cognitive abilities, however the overall aim is not employment. Pike and Farley (2018) state the purpose of vocational training is to build and enhance a specific skills set, with the aim to increase employability. Some individuals with autism may not have employment as a priority upon release, however, this study is of the belief this should not halt education, with personal development and purposeful activity being perceived as extremely beneficial to increasing mental well-being (Stephenson et al, 2020) as well as fulfilling an individual's day. For positive outcomes to be achieved, individuals with autism require prisons to recognise and understand their educational needs and adjust their educational opportunities to ensure they are accessible. Included in the term 'educational opportunities' would be vocational courses, rehabilitation courses, academic learning focusing on Literacy, numeracy, and ICT, as well as opportunities to access the library and play games with their peers.

## 5.3 Person-centred planning and adjustments in relation to education in prison

This section will explore the adjustments, accommodations and person-centred planning Prison AA implemented to promote positive educational and rehabilitative outcomes for individuals with autism. It is important to note that all adjustments made to education for participants within this study, were made whilst such individuals were segregated, experiencing education on C Block.

### 5.3.1 Flexibility, choice, and control

Both staff and participants discussed how C Block allows room for flexibility of the rules and regimes, especially in relation to education and learning opportunities. Jonathan states that "down here now with the new regime that they've got, people have their own flexibility to pick and choose what they want, and it creates a better atmosphere for the lads, reducing their stress levels." Emma echoes this, stating that "education comes first … adjustments are made to allow for individual needs to be met." When questioned further about this, Emma referred to individuals attending alternative classes based on sensory sensitivities, missing work duties when overwhelmed or frustrated, and the education department "using personal interests of the lads to encourage them to attend classes and be more engaged." This was evident for several participants within this study, one being Carl, who Jonathan reported is "allowed to chill on the wing rather than go to work if today isn't a good day". Although routines and structure can support a reduction in stress and anxiety for individuals with autism (McAdam, 2012; Vinter et al, 2020), the need for flexibility is still present as sometimes emotions and senses can become overwhelming, especially within a prison setting (Paterson, 2008). Implementing

accommodations when appropriate, allowing education to continue to be successful, even on challenging days, promotes an inclusive practice.

Additionally, Edward discussed an altercation with a member of staff which occurred during COVID, when he was on his way to work. Since then, Edward reports that he has chosen to remove himself from all education and work. Edward feels that his educational opportunities were not challenging enough and missing learning "didn't really matter anyway as I wasn't learning anything anyway". Discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, Edward spoke openly about his inability to access higher education whilst in prison, which resulted in learning opportunities currently on offer to him, not being appropriate. Yet, removing himself completely from all daily activities, including purposeful activity, may result in him becoming bored and frustrated due to the loss of daily structure. Emma did report that should Edward decide to participate in education in the future "staff would support him to make a personalised timetable which suited his needs." This flexibility to learning allows individuals with autism to participate in education when they feel ready, knowing appropriate support is available.

Both Emma and Jonathan discussed how Billy often required a sensory break outside of the classroom when he became overwhelmed, which was an integral part of him being able to access any form of learning. Emma states, "it was about giving him structured smaller sessions because sensory wise, he couldn't cope." Jonathan echoed this, explaining, "if one day he was having a bad day and couldn't cope, he can just go and sit in an empty classroom with somebody." It could be suggested that this adjustment supports Billy's educational journey to stay positive, as when Billy access it, he is able to do so successfully, but incorporating flexibility allows him time away when required. Having trained staff who can identify when Billy is having a bad day supports an anticipatory approach, giving Billy options, rather than encouraging him to attend education to become increasingly overwhelmed. Yet, when Education was discussed with Billy, he declared that he was not given much choice and control over how to full his day, due to his perceived previous negative behaviours. Billy detailed how he is "banned from gym" due to an altercation with another individual, so instead feels "forced" to fill his day with education. Emma also reported similar conclusions for Carl, stating that "Carl's behaviour can sometimes be unsafe so we can't have him going off the wing but the only education we have on the wing is low level stuff, which is not challenging enough for him." Although adjustments are implemented for Carl on the wing, he could most likely be restricted from accessing education for reasons relating to his autism, that staff are not aware of. This is a failure of the reasonable adjustments duty to ensure individuals with autism are not put at a substantial disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers.

### 5.3.2 Accessibility and differentiated curriculum

As discussed in greater detail in later in this chapter, Daniel spoke about his current education, referencing the months of the year and beginning to remember his password to log onto the computer independently as recent achievements in class. In a group interview, Mike refers to this as “very low-level stuff”. For education to be meaningful and successful, it must be pitched at the correct level (Creese, 2016), something which evidently worked for Daniel. It could be argued that such a personalised approach may be challenging to implement within the mainstream part of the prison, as even with reasonable adjustments, Daniel may still be presented with difficulties accessing the content of whole class learning. Nevertheless, taking a social model perspective, individuals should not need to be segregated for them to have their educational needs met. Daniel appears proud of his achievements, suggesting that for him, this is more important than accessing literacy and numeracy lessons on the education wing.

During his interview, Jonathan stated how Carl struggled to stay focused when he previously attended literacy and numeracy lessons. He explained how Carl, while academically able, was prohibited from attending education off the wing due to his perceived challenging behaviour, resulting in him being in classes that did not challenge him. Jonathan discussed how he supported Carl in lessons and when he noticed him becoming distracted, he would “make him a quiz to test his memory … he would sit there for about an hour without a peep.” This accommodation promotes excellent practice, highlighting how well Jonathan knows Carl’s individual needs, and can quickly implement strategies to reduce the risk of him becoming frustrated, bored, stressed, or overwhelmed. What the prison fails to acknowledge is the isolation and segregation Carl is currently facing, with unequal access to the educational opportunities on offer. But if the support provided by Jonathan was mirrored within the mainstream part of the prison, it could promote an inclusive prison society.

The government state that they are keen for individuals in prison to have similar educational opportunities to those within the community (Coates, 2016), however, it is evident that such opportunities are limited for individuals with autism participating in this study. This may be due to the prison restricting them due to low literacy and numeracy levels, however, this does not mirror that within the community. Individuals can access vocational courses within the community, alongside participating in their literacy and numeracy qualifications. Such limitations can affect the motivation and enthusiasm of individuals to participate in education at all. This appeared to be evident for Fred, who has not always been against participating in education, however felt that he was currently unable to due

to ‘being knocked back’, lack of support, as well as minimal courses available. He states, “I’ve been here four years and I’ve done two courses since I’ve been here … not many good ones [courses] to choose from though and we never fit the criteria for the good ones anyway.” Fred raises some concerns here relating to the lack of courses available, but also his accessibility on them. Such findings are not isolated. HM Inspectorate of Prisons and OFSTED (2022) discovered that education and personal development of skills was not always seen as a priority, nor was there a solid structure to it, often resulting in many individuals not obtaining any basic qualifications or developing their skills whilst in prison, ultimately not reflecting the government’s aim. When questioned further on why Fred feels he ‘does not fit the criteria’ for vocational courses, he began discussing his addiction to drugs and how his “behaviour is bad, and they won’t let me go on it when I don’t follow the rules”. This suggests that education and rehabilitation in prison is seen as a privilege rather than a priority. This vision has the risk of significantly decreasing the motivation, confidence, and self-esteem of individuals in prison towards learning.

Difficulties in accessing vocational courses also appeared to be evident for Adam. Prior to residing on C Block, Adam participated in courses on the education wing. During his interview, Jonathan stated that Adam “had a go at the workshops but he didn’t last long in them.” He disclosed that this was due to altercations with other individuals due to their inability to appropriately understand Adam’s communication. This resulted in Adam being removed from the course, with staff stating this was because Adam became “verbally aggressive”. As with Fred, this raises questions about the prisons' ability to recognise and appropriately respond to the needs of individuals with autism. Although all individuals must adhere to prison rules and regulations, it appears that more needs to be done to support not only staff's ability to understand and respond appropriately to individual needs, but also for awareness of autism to be better promoted across the entire prison.

Conversations with Billy suggested that he was currently disengaged with learning, expressing his dislike for his class. Yet, Emma and Jonathan felt that they had made numerous adjustments to support Billy to participate in the educational opportunities available to him, however they were unsuccessful. Jonathan stated how billy was able to “join other classes when he is distressed, or his teacher is absent … attend classes that are of interest to him … and allowing him time outside the classroom” when he is overwhelmed, stressed, or frustrated. Emma’s comments mirrored this, stating that Billy has “flexibility with his educational routine and if he is highly dysregulated one day, there are adjustments in place which means he doesn’t have to join class that day, or he can join but at a later time.” There does appear to be some accommodations to the educational routine and policy to support Billy, however,

these do not appear to be successful. Jonathan discussed how Billy was able to 'attend classes that met his interests' however, this currently was not the case as Billy discussed his dislike of his current class. Champion and Nobel (2015) have previously noted that tailoring education packages to personal interests of prisoners is highly beneficial in making learning more engaging. They proclaim that education that ties into personal interests allows individuals to not only progress academically but also creates positive outcomes for individuals' holistic development. More recently, the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021) discussed how educational opportunities within prisons are limited, with prison governors able to select courses and classes they believe suit the environment and individuals they support. This creates a postcode lottery of what courses are available and which suit personal interests.

## 5.4 Education on C Block

All participants within this study discussed some form of education that they currently, or have previously participated in. All current education delivered occurred on C Block, however, discussions did take place regarding vocational courses, rehabilitation courses and purposeful activity, which could provide participants the opportunity to socialise with other prisoners, who do not reside on C Block and access the mainstream part of the prison. This section will explore the educational opportunities on C Block for individuals with autism and discuss what works for whom, looking specifically at learning and development of cognitive abilities.

### 5.4.1 Personalised education package

During interviews, Daniel appeared the most vocal and proud of his current educational journey, discussing his achievements at great length. He informed me that his experience of education in childhood was negative, resulting in him not achieving his literacy and numeracy qualifications. But his determination to succeed was evident, with his appearing to be engaged, find enjoyment and was motivated to learn. Daniel explained how he completes some work on the computer, with the support of staff, and was excited to tell me what he had learnt. He recalls; "you know what I learnt yesterday, want to hear? ... Months of the year ... January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, December." The enthusiasm and pride displayed here was evident, especially given that Daniel was smiling throughout, stating;

"They would say, 'oh there's a fight on in June' and I wouldn't have a clue when that was. I would wake up every day and be like 'how long until the fight?' and they would laugh and be like 'oh it's another couple of months away'."

Life skills and development of cognitive abilities, such as this, is vital for personal growth at any age (Coates, 2016) and in Daniel's case, boosted his confidence and self-esteem around education. This highlights that progress should not always be measured by qualifications and academic levels, with holistic benefits needing to be considered. Having a bespoke educational pathway worked for Daniel, however, it does raise questions as to whether such support could be mirrored within the mainstream part of the prison. In a group interview, Mike disclosed that Daniel participated in sessions aimed at individuals with a learning need, informing me that; "it's like what they would teach you in primary school, or even in special school." Mike appears to be suggesting that Daniel's education package is very specialised, something which may be unavailable to him should be access the education wing. However, with reports suggesting that over half of the prison population have very low literacy skills (HM Inspectorate of Prisons and OFSTED, 2022), this individualised support could also be beneficial for other prisoners, who do not have a diagnosis of autism or reside on C Block. Mirroring this support on the education wing would promote inclusion but also support a social model perspective, adapting mainstream facilities to enable individuals with autism to be included.

### 5.4.2 Development opportunities

Higher education and Open University courses in prisons has always been undertaken by distance learning, with individuals having to use course materials and online resources to support their learning, rather than taught by teachers within a classroom (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a). Such courses require funding, as within the community, and many individuals in prison struggle to obtain such funds or successfully apply for them. Carl discusses how he would like to apply for higher educational courses; however, he is currently not permitted to do so. He states, "I would like to do open university and do a couple of courses, but they say my behaviour is bad." In his interview, Jonathan did recognise Carl's academic ability, "he's extremely clever, like a sponge … one day he actually read a dictionary." Billy appears to be experiencing similar barriers, with Jonathan disclosing to me that his perceived challenging behaviour is preventing him from accessing the education wing. He reports:

> "He is too clever, and he needs to be challenged …but when he's up there [education wing] he is displaying challenging behaviours and can be rude towards them [teachers] and they just think "fuck it, he can go back to them [C Block]" … but if he had more challenging work he might get his head down more."

Despite these claims, both Carl's and Billy's education took place on the wing, resulting in them not being challenged educationally. It appears that education for both Billy and Carl is used as a reward,

with it being withdrawn when they do not comply with prison expectations. It suggests that the prison is not implementing adjustments to ensure all individuals educational needs are met, and instead focus more on perceived challenging behaviours, which might also be triggered by their environment and lack of accommodations for their individual needs. This highlights the attitudinal barriers currently preventing higher educational inclusion for individuals with autism, restricting access to opportunities which may be available to others across the mainstream part of the prison.

Edward also shared similar frustrations, stating that "I'm smart enough to do uni … but the government just don't give a shit about people like me, what I'm capable of or whatever." Although educational adjustments for individuals with autism are implemented on C Block, they do not appear to work for Billy Carl or Edward, especially given that the support they require is not around their cognitive abilities. For individuals such to be able to participate, attitudinal, environmental, and structural barriers would need to be removed to enable them to be successful and make meaningful progress.

## 5.5 Development of employability skills and vocational courses

Vocational courses and the development of skills can offer an individual in prison the opportunity to learn a new skill, within an area of interest, which can support their chances of gaining employment upon release (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a; MOJ, 2021). The courses on offer can vary across prisons within the UK, as governors can work closely with local providers to identify what they believe are the best courses to offer, creating a 'postcode lottery' where certain establishments may offer a greater range of courses. Emma points out, for individuals with autism who participate in vocational courses within prison, even with onsite experience, transferring the skills learnt into 'real-life' situations upon release can be challenging. She states,

"We can try and set like a mock version of what we need to do but it's not really putting it into practice. It's like doing all the training in the world but you've got to go out there on your own and do it. And that's very difficult for some guys to grasp."

In her review, Coates (2016) recognised that vocational courses offer individuals in prison the opportunity to learn new skills which can be implemented within the work environment upon release. However, she fails to consider how individuals with autism may transfer these skills into a real-life context. This was later echoed by Carruthers et al (2020) who highlighted that the skill of transferring a new skill can be challenging, as individuals are unable to predict social responses, prepare for immediate change as well as adapt their behaviour to suit the situation. This is something the government have

failed to consider when trying to execute plans to reduce re-offending by promoting the development of skills.

Emma does refer to the effort the prison has made to support the needs of individuals with autism, making connections with external providers to enhance learning and skills; “[we] have got a contract with Network rail, and we have actual rail tracks on site now so people can learn how to fix actual railways. So, there are real jobs coming into the prison.” Emma appears to contradict herself here, suggesting that opportunities are available within the prison, however, individuals with autism may not obtain the desired outcomes from them as their ability to transfer skills is limited. Edward was very critical of such courses, stating that “the problem with all that rail stuff … it depends on what sentence you’re on”. Edward was the only participant that discussed the introduction of the rail courses, suggesting that such opportunities are not readily available to individuals on C Block. This suggests that participation in such educational opportunities is selective.

George appears to mirror the government’s ambition of developing education to increase employment opportunities, explaining “I got my math's earlier on, and I need to sign up to do my English. Just get my qualifications now, isn’t it and its done … I want to get on a bricklaying course, isn’t it? So, I can get a job when I get out.” George’s focus on developing his education and enhancing his skills to increase the chances of employment upon release is evident, however, there was no reference on how he would achieve this or whether he would require any additional support. The House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a) argues that if individuals in prison are to be successful, they must take ownership of their education, and without personal motivation, they may find themselves unable to make meaningful progress. Although George’s primary objective appears to be employment, he understands his educational journey is the initial part of this and is motivated to achieve.

## 5.6 Offender Management Programmes

Offender management programmes are considered to be an integral part of an individual’s success when in prison, providing them with the tools to address their offending behaviour and learn strategies to prevent the risk of re-offending (MOJ & HMPPS, 2022). Such programmes have often been targeted at individuals with drug and alcohol dependency, violence reduction as well as anger management, all with the aim to help individuals made a positive change (MOJ & HMPPS, 2022). In this study, Fred openly discusses how he has attended several courses whilst in prison, relating to drugs, one being a ‘victim awareness course’. He expressed how he felt it was “pointless” especially given that his ‘victim’ was a drug dealer. He states, “it was all about Jesus and God … all it made me want to do is punch my

victim in the face even more." Fred appears to be suggesting that the course did not appear relevant to the 'crime', highlighting how such programmes may not cater for people with autism and their individual needs. Such findings are not uncommon, Bullock and Bruce (2020) discovered that many individuals found offending behaviour courses to be lacking purpose, value and motivation to help them make a positive change. Additionally, for an individual with autism, such courses may pose further challenges, as they may be unable to successfully show empathy (Browning and Caulfield, 2011) something which relates directly to their condition, and they should not be penalised for.

Furthermore, Fred states he was "forced" to attend the drug awareness course, highlighting his frustrations towards the structure and content of it. He reports:

"They don't help you! Listen, I can do a drug course. They ask me, 'why do you take drugs?' I say, 'listen right, I take drugs for one reason and I'm not telling you.' They say, 'I need to know'. I say, 'no you don't need to know because then you will set me off and I'll want to fucking kill you'. She was like 'oh, I need to know; I need to know'. I had to fucking walk out the course because she was trying to push me. You shouldn't have to push me, if I don't want to talk about it then I don't want to talk about it, don't push me."

Feeling forced may have already created barriers for Fred's motivation to change. This, coupled with staff being unaware of how to support Fred to access the course successfully, and communicate effectively with him, appeared to make him agitated and frustrated, resulting in him choosing to remove himself. Although the MOJ (2021) recognise that individuals must be fully ready to address their 'offending behaviour' if positive changes are to occur, they fail to recognise the importance of the structure of the course, its contents, how its delivered as well as the length of time required to complete it. All factors could potentially be barriers for success for individuals with autism, which was evident for Fred, who had difficulty associating the course content to his crime.

Continuously, UNESCO (2021) highlight how education should be optional and not forced upon individuals in prison. Pressuring somebody to discuss a sensitive topic when they are not ready can have the opposite effect. This was something Billy also experienced. Jonathan discloses how the prison has previously "tried to encourage Billy to attend a rehabilitation course to address his drug and alcohol" addiction, however he refused. Jonathan stated that Billy has proclaimed to him that he "don't have a problem with drugs and alcohol". Although Billy did not disclose anything relating to an addiction, when discussing education and courses he did state that his art class is "better than the other courses they

tried to force me to attend, saying I had problems and shit." When questioned more about this, Billy just replied that "the prison say I've got addiction problems, but it's all shit, got no problems." Taking a social model perspective, this could suggest that for Billy to be motivated and want to address and overcome any substance misuse, the courses available need to be tailored to support the needs of individuals with autism, taking into consideration potential barriers to success.

George did disclose how he now has the motivation to make positive choices, stating "just trying to get a job isn't it? Because I never really worked, you get me. Just always been surrounded by drugs and drink." Although George did not discuss any programmes or courses, he was currently participating in to help support him to make positive choices, he did still appear to want to make changes to increase his chances of success upon release. The Halliday review (2021) called for prisons to work towards identifying what programmes would better suit the individual, rather than forcing them to attend one which may not be beneficial, reducing the risk of failure or frustrations. However, this would require prisons to know each individual very well, including their motivation to change, their educational background, as well as offer support to reduce the risk of them returning to the environment where they found themselves caught up within the justice system, upon release. The reality of this is that prisons may not have the staff or time to dedicate time to all prisoners.

## 5.7 Purposeful Activity

This section will explore activities that this thesis believes to be 'purposeful activity'. The prison did not always identify the following activities under this theme, however, due to personal growth and development occurring for many individuals, it was deemed appropriate to include them with education.

### 5.7.1 Physical activity

The most discussed purposeful activity throughout this study, which participants described as being the most enjoyable was utilising the gym facilities. Such facilities were located off the wing, therefore were not available to all individuals on C Block, as restrictions such as 'good behaviour' were factors in accessibility. Physical exercise has been proven to link to positive mental health (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; WHO, 2014), something which Fred recognised, stating, "mental health isn't it. Helps you become a better person." Sadly, poor mental health is not uncommon in prison and although progress has been made since the NHS began managing healthcare in prisons in 2005, more still needs to be done (House of Commons, 2021). One way to improve this is through physical activity. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021a) argues that it is highly beneficial for individuals to be permitted to use the gym facilities at least

twice a week. However, as discussed previously, this was not always possible for participants within this study due to displaying perceived challenging behaviours and access to the gym being removed. For individuals in this study who did utilise the gym, such as George, he declared that it "keeps me busy and takes my mind off everything." Harry also stated how he benefitted from weekly gym time, "I go to the gym three times a week. Helps me de-stress." For Fred, Harry and George, it is evident that the gym facilities are an important aspect of their weekly routine, contributing to a positive mental well-being, increased physical health and often a relief from boredom as there is increased social interaction.

### 5.7.2 Animals in prison

During Billy's interview, two therapy dogs entered the room and Billy appeared to be extremely pleased to see them as he smiled and quickly moved towards the dogs to stroke and hug them. Once they left, Billy spoke openly about his passion for caring for animals, however, he was unable to pursue this whilst in prison. He reports, "there's a farm here but the nonce's are the only ones that are allowed to look after them. Fucking pisses, me off because I would take better care of them." Ormerod (2008) highlighted how caring for animals can be extremely beneficial for individuals in prison, proving to reduce stress and anxieties. For individuals with autism, spending time with animals can also be calming and therapeutic, so much so that the NAS has recognised the important work one dog charity does to assist individuals with autism within the community. Although prisons are not obliged to provide therapeutic services such as therapy dogs or farms, it is extremely positive that prison AA does have this facility and individuals with autism do have the opportunity to experience this. But, as with other facilities and services, access is limited and again largely depends on 'positive behaviour'. This could create unfair consequences for individuals with autism, who may struggle to adapt and manage the additional pressures of prison life, such as the loud noises, unfamiliar people, change in routine etc. Without adjustments to the behaviour policy, as well as trained staff who can recognise potential barriers and implement appropriate strategies, individuals with autism may be at risk of being treated unfairly for reasons relating to their autism. It did appear that this provision worked well for Billy, who instantly became calm within the dog's presence, however, when I returned to the prison, eighteen months later, this provision was no longer being implemented, did it appear to be a priority anymore with no staff making reference to it, or similar alternative provisions.

### 5.7.3 Reading for pleasure

One activity that can be argued is a vital life skill is reading. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) highlight how reading should be promoted through all aspects of education, including educational services

delivered within prisons. Without this skill, individuals are at risk of becoming isolated, due to inability to read signs, instructions, forms etc. Within this study, both Adam and Daniel report how they enjoy reading, although both appear to have different interests and are currently at various stages within their literacy skills. Daniel reports how he enjoys books about boxing and space, whereas Adam states he has not signed up to a book club yet but intends to quickly as he enjoys the activity. Adam informs me, "I enjoy reading. To be honest on the outside I don't like to read but since being in prison I have started to read some quite substantial material." Reading more will be beneficial for Adam's cognitive development and literacy skills and something which the prison appears to have encouraged by providing materials of interest to him. Daniel reports how he likes to read books about professional boxers, "love looking at all the pictures of his fights." Although Daniel states that he enjoys looking at the photos in the book, it is evident that he takes pleasure from them, therefore this activity should be encouraged wherever possible. In their report, the House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a) recognised the key role libraries can play in the holistic development of individuals in prison, calling for more books to be readily available to everybody, with a variety of topics and levels to choose from; encouraging reading for pleasure. It appears that within this study, prison libraries have had a positive impact on some participants, who, within the community may not have engaged with reading as much.

## 5.8 Employment in prison

Employment within prison is sometimes referred to as purposeful activity (HM Inspectorate of Prisons and OFSTED, 2022) however, this thesis has chosen to separate this as often jobs are not always enjoyable but instead serve a purpose of financial security or purpose to the day, rather than enjoyment; something which purposeful activity should be. During his interview Jonathan stated that when individuals enter prison, they complete a questionnaire, which asks about "education background and any disabilities they have". Jonathan continues to state that once an individual is identified as having autism or an additional need, a healthcare professional will complete the 'DO IT' profiler questionnaire with them, gaining greater understanding of their needs. Jonathan explains that this allows the prison to "look at where they are at in terms of their education and looks at their interests and stuff so if they want a job, we can help with that". Yet, as discussed in this chapter, education comes first and without holding relevant qualifications, individuals with autism are unable to apply for prison employment.

Within this study, obtaining a job whilst in prison was a topic of discussion for many participants, and appeared to be a motivator to continuing their education. Harry declared he would like to apply for a job to, “pass the time, isn’t it? … lots of choice isn’t there.” Adam’s reasoning was to socialise, “I want to get a job so I can get out and then there’s more people.” Both Harry and Adam were aware of their need to increase their academic skills prior to obtaining a job and were willing to do so to take advantage of the benefits of having a job in prison. Harry also refers to the wide range of job options within the prison, however, when questioned further, he was unable to comment on whether the jobs available after obtaining his qualifications were across the whole prison or just on C Block. Jonathan clarified later by stating that “most of the jobs available for the lads down here are jobs on this wing, but some do mean that they have to go on other wings, and we support that and escort them there when they do it.” Although it appears positive that job opportunities are available, this does suggest that they are limited to just C Block, due to such individuals perceived as requiring a chaperone.

If individuals with autism are to be successful in a job within the mainstream part of the prison, they will require staff to be understanding and aware of their needs. According to Jonathan, “many staff up there [on different wings] don’t know how to deal with these lads so they just like, send them to C Block, they can look after them.” This would suggest that without an ‘escort’ or staff from C Block, individuals with autism may not have their needs effectively understood when accessing the mainstream part of the prison. Or their requests for certain jobs, which may require them to access other parts of the prison, may be denied. This was evident for Fred, who informed me that he has “been sacked three times … I got sacked from savoury, head savoury, head cleaner … hummm what else? Can’t remember what else there is, been sacked a few times.” This appears to be a repeated cycle for Fred, one that is not being addressed by himself or the prison and consequently, he is finding himself participating in perceived challenging behaviours which the prison deems unsuitable for the job role he is in; therefore, he is dismissed. This does raise concerns about Fred’s ability to be successful in maintaining employment upon release into the community, especially if the support available is less than provided in prison.

Edward also appeared to be unsuccessful maintaining a job but declared that it was his choice to be currently unemployed within prison, due to an altercation with staff, who he reports, “just don’t have a fucking clue about autism or how to meet our needs.” Edwards perception stems from negative experiences with several staff, across the prison, with his most recent one being about the job he was doing. Due to the altercation, Edward has now chosen to leave his job, declaring that the staff can “stick your job up your arse, I will sit in my cell.” The Department of Health and Social Care and DoE (2021) conclude that although there have been improvements to support individuals with autism to seek and maintain employment, more still needs to be done to ensure reasonable adjustments are being made to enable success. Although this is referring to individuals within the community, the report does refer to the lack of awareness and understanding amongst prison staff to appropriately support such individuals (Department of Health and Social Care and DoE, 2021), raising concerns as to whether employment within prison is a realistic expectation for individuals with autism, especially if there is a lack of support available for them from aware and knowledgeable staff, who can successfully put adjustments into place.

Employment within prison is seen as important as it prepares individuals for life within the community, reducing the risk of reoffending. Alongside this, individuals with autism may require additional support to connect with external providers within the community to begin to plan for release. This was something that was recognised by Prison AA, with Emma stating that she will offer support to attend “an interview in prison so they can be released with work, and you know, have a support system in place.” Such support may be invaluable for individuals with autism, as it helps them prepare for life within the community, utilising the support whilst it is available, as upon release obtaining support may be challenging.

## 5.9 Barriers and limitations

This section will explore the barriers and limitations for individuals with autism and their accessibility to education within prison.

### 5.9.1 Staff Shortages

Although Fred was the only participant to identify staff shortages as a barrier, he appeared very passionate about it and the effects it has on him and his participation in activities around C Block and the wider prison. He states, “we can’t do anything in here because there’s no fucking staff to support us.

Can't go gym, can't go classes, can't get a job". This would suggest that due to a limited number of staff working, Fred's has a lot of unstructured time in the day, most of which does not appear to be by choice. The Criminal Justice Alliance (2021) has previously mirrored Fred's frustrations, highlighting their concerns around the number of hours in the day where learning and/or purposeful activity does not take place due to a shortage of officers. For individuals with autism, who rely heavily on routine and structure, having minimal staff to support with everyday tasks, such as supervising a person on their way to class or support with obtaining a job, can have a negative impact on their holistic development and consequently, impact their motivation and determination to succeed and rehabilitate. This appears to be the case for Fred, who's motivation to attend classes, offending behaviour programmes or apply for a job, is low, which may have a direct impact on his success upon release. Staff shortages therefore could directly impact the positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

### 5.9.2 Lack of understanding of individuals needs and desires

One significant barrier to full inclusion and participation was the limited awareness and understanding of all prison staff, across the entire prison. Consequently, individuals with autism who did access facilities and services off the wing, were put at a substantial disadvantage when interacting with staff who were unaware of their individual needs and how to meet them, as well as effectively communicate, identify barriers and make adjustments. This appeared evident for Billy who stated, "I used to go gym, but I'm banned from that now for apparently being fucking aggressive." Throughout his interview, Billy used 'offensive language' in the form of 'swear words' 181 times, however, not once did I feel he was being aggressive towards me. Such words, I felt, were used to emphasise his points, and a way of him expressing his emotions towards the situation. It is believed that this is Billy's way of communicating, and adaptations, support and understanding does not appear to be available for Billy when accessing services off the wing. Due to a lack of understanding of Billy's needs, consequences were imposed, which could be argued now negatively affect his holistic development. Having only trained staff working on C Block does not appear to work effectively for individuals with autism, who may then experience discrimination.

### 5.9.3 Length of sentence

The length of an individual's sentence can impact on whether they can participate in education when in prison. This was evident for some participants within this study. Edward was very critical of the education system within prisons, declaring that it prevents him from making progress. He states, "the

open uni courses and stuff, you on a long stretch don't even bother thinking about it." The House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a) highlights how individuals on a 'long-term sentence' of six years or more are ineligible to apply for higher education and open university courses. This significantly restricts their educational opportunities and does not mirror the educational opportunities and timelines within the community.

This was also evident for Adam, whose original sentence was not considered a 'shorter sentence', however when his needs were recognised and he was offered the support required to access education, he had less than a year prior to release, therefore such provisions were heavily restricted. This was because many of the courses available on the wing required a certain amount of time to complete, something which Adam did not have. OFSTED (2009) have explained that those who are sentenced to shorter sentences, which are deemed as twelve months or less, are unable to apply for higher education and open university courses, including level 2/3 certificates. During her interview, Emma proclaimed that in terms of Adams education, the prison had failed him, stating, "there is only so much work you can do in that space of time … in a way we haven't met his learning needs in a classroom." Emma did later state that Adam was now accessing some form of classroom learning, "he now engages in some classes." However, no qualifications or certificates will be obtained due to the type of lesson he attends, and the time left on his sentence for him to fully participate and complete any course. This highlights the significant restrictions already imposed on individuals with autism in prison, prior to their individual needs being taken into consideration. In this instance, education did not work for both Edward and Adam, as their sentences impacted their educational opportunities.

## 5.10 Conclusion

Within a prison setting, many individuals with autism may need a variety of support packages, including that on an emotional level, appropriate verbal and visual explanations, differentiated curriculum and educational opportunities, as well as reasonable adjustments to the prison environment and regime, if they are to be successful in education. This will ensure their needs are successfully understood and met (Allely and Wood, 2022; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2017). It is recognised by the Council of Europe, Rule 28 of the European Prison Rules (2020) that extra attention should be given to those with 'special needs' or those who 'lack basic vocational education'. This would include individuals with autism, whose literacy and numeracy skills may be lower than GCSE level. This may be due to a negative experience during compulsory school age, or inaccessibility of education. Therefore, there is a need to provide additional resources for such individuals to ensure they are not put at a substantial disadvantage

compared to their non-disabled peers, in relation to access all forms of education, rehabilitative and work opportunities, as well as meaningful and purposeful activities, when in prison.

Restrictions were imposed on individuals with autism, who resided on C Block and their literacy and numeracy skills were identified as low. For some this appeared extremely beneficial, with bespoke educational packages being tailored to meet individual needs. For Daniel who appeared proud of his educational achievements, this personalised approach which catered for his educational levels and individual needs worked well. Daniel's education took place on C Block, with significant fewer individuals present, all being taught by trained staff who have a greater understanding of autism. Again, this worked well for Daniel, as they were able to respond to his needs, implement a package of support, resulting in positive outcomes for him. With a government that is pushing for a system where the purpose of education is to create a prison society that us 'employable' upon release, such tailored support would not meet their expectations. Nevertheless, research has called for prisons to step away from this model and focus more on developing the individual as a person (University and College Union, 2021) supporting them to become a well-rounded individual. Although this thesis does not dispute the critical role education plays on the development, progression, and success of an individual in prisons, it does raise concerns around the success of the education agenda, especially if self-confidence, self-esteem, problem solving skills, and support to make positive decisions are not regarded as priority. Within this study, it was evident that C Block did prioritise learning and development, however, more for individuals with low literacy and numeracy levels. Yet, such priorities created segregation away from the mainstream part of the prison, something which did not appear desirable for some participants such as Edward and Fred. Discussions with staff in this study highlighted how officers across the mainstream part of the prison are unaware of how to identify, adapt services and resources as well as effectively communicate with individuals with autism. Instead, the consensus is to 'send them to C Block' where staff's understanding is greater, with individualised support offered. This creates an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality, which increases the risk of individuals with autism who access the mainstream part of the prison, being discriminated against and not having their needs met.

For those wanting to access higher education courses, such as Edward and Carl, opportunities are limited. They are further limited by the length of their sentences (Coates, 2016) as well as perceived challenging behaviours. Although research has shown significant benefits are to be had from allowing individuals in prison to participate in higher education, calling for barriers to be removed (Farley and Pike, 2018), it could be argued that within this study this was not achieved. Edward and Carl's

educational opportunities were restricted, which significantly affects their ability to make academic progress and demonstrate improvement by being 'employability ready'. Higher education courses were accessed off the wing but also involve a lot of independent study. No participant within this thesis discussed the educational support available for individuals with autism whose literacy and numeracy skills were of a good standard. This suggests that education for such individuals does not work, with adjustments not being implemented to ensure equal opportunities.

The desired outcome of offender management courses can only be achieved if the course is pitched at the right level for all participants, as well as portraying purpose and value, something which may be lacking (Bullock and Bruce, 2020). Fred was the only participant to discuss any offender management courses, however, this experience was negative, resulting in him being disengaged and frustrated. Fred discusses how the course content, as well as those delivering it, had minimal awareness of autism and Fred's individual needs. Consequently, Fred's engagement with such courses is now low, therefore he may never fully be able to, what the MOJ describe as 'address his offending behaviour'. Additionally, such courses were delivered off C Block, again, with staff who were not trained in autism, suggesting that once individuals with autism leave the wing, support is absent. This will ultimately affect positive outcomes as well as places responsibility solely with staff on C Block, rather than a whole prison approach. This creates a medical model approach, suggesting that Fred's behaviour and 'unwillingness' to participate and engage is the reason he is unsuccessful. Instead, to support Fred to make positive outcomes, Prison AA need to consider the disabling barriers present, which prevent Fred's participation, demotivating him from accessing the course, and those similar.

It can be argued, based on evidence from this study, that providing an inclusive prison community which caters for the educational individuals' needs of people with autism is challenging. Providing tailored educational support packages are an excellent way to engage individuals in education that it pitched at the right level, however, only being able to access this if literacy and numeracy levels are low and you reside on C Block, creates further isolated and segregation. Yet, if the Education Wing did mirror such support, difficulties around social communication and interaction, as well as sensory sensitivities may increase as individuals enter a busier classroom, with people who may be unfamiliar to them. This could have the opposite effect, create low self-esteem, confidence, and perceived challenging behaviours. Nevertheless, a social model perspective should be taken, with prisons making anticipatory adjustments to enable all individuals to have access to equal educational opportunities, with support which suits their individual needs.

For participation in purposeful activities, often adjustments and accommodations must be made to ensure full inclusion for individuals with autism. There is no legal framework for prisons when providing purposeful activity, therefore it is not always seen as a priority (Stephenson et al, 2020). This research argues that purposeful activity is as important as the development of academic knowledge and personal skills as it can support an individual's mental well-being and bring purpose and stimulation to their day. It was evident for several participants, such as Daniel who took great pleasure in reading, or Fred who felt that access to the gym supported his physical and mental well-being. This was something highlighted in Stephenson's et al (2020) extensive literature review of time out of cell and participation in purposeful activity, with results concluding that reduced participation in purposeful activity can increase the risk of developing poor mental health, increasing the risk of suicide. Yet, despite this, challenges and barriers restrict individuals from participating in such activities, with them often being removed if expectations and rules are believed to not have been followed. This highlights how prison deem purposeful activity to be a privilege, rather than a necessity to fulfil and individuals' day, promoting a happy, calmer, and stimulating atmosphere. The withdrawal of purposeful activities had a negative effect on participants within this study, highlighting that allowing individuals to participate in activities that are of interest to them, can support positive outcomes.

# 6. Chapter Six: Social Communication, Interaction, and the effect this has on relationships

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore ways in which communication occurs for individuals with autism within this study, along with the impact this has on them forming and maintaining relationships with other prisoners, staff as well as individuals within the community. Effective communication must include some level of understanding from all parties involved (NAS, 2024). Interactions occur when two or more people respond to each other's communication (NAS, 2024), again, this does not always have to be via speaking, but some degree of understanding must be present if social interactions are to be positive and successful.

Many individuals with autism aspire to achieve meaningful relationships and close bonds with others, despite the associated difficulties (Crompton et al, 2020). These can include very literal thinking, which can lead to misunderstandings or confusion when humour, sarcasm or idiomatic expression is used; difficulties in initiating conversations or maintaining ones, especially if it does not involve as topic of interest or reading non-verbal social cues. When in prison, the desire to build positive relationships can be no different, however additional challenges may be present alongside the everyday pressures of a prison environment. Appropriate social communication can play a significant role in forming bonds with others whilst in prison. Such interactions can impact an individual's ability to successfully cope with the pressures prison brings (De-Viggiani, 2018). With unwritten rules, often referred to as 'the inmate code' being adhered to, but not explicitly explained, individuals with autism may find themselves at risk of victimisation, violence, or exploitation (Michalski, 2015). Due to this, individuals with autism may find social interactions with others challenging, with more support required to create a sense of awareness and acceptance, alongside creating a safe environment. This will be explored within this chapter.

## 6.2 Social communication in the context of this study

Although the prison standards did not appear to directly promote positive relationships across the prison environment as an important aim, this study argues that without such relationships, positive outcomes for individuals with autism cannot occur. This starts with effective communication, understanding and awareness of individual needs, something which the NAS prison standards do promote through effective training. Referring to Chapter 4, it was outlined that the standards call for a more in-depth induction training programme, allowing all new staff the opportunity to gain knowledge,

awareness and understanding of autism. Training is the first step in creating a more inclusive, understanding, and aware environment, which allows for positive relationships to begin. This was something Slokan and Ioannou (2021) discussed, in their study on the training needs for prison officers, in relation to autism. They concluded that communication with individuals with autism is a key and primary focus of training courses, as it informs them of the difficulties which may be present for individuals with autism, but strategies on how to overcome these. Slokan and Ioannou (2021) also include the voices of individuals with autism, with one participant discussing how staff's perceptions of his communication skills is a barrier for him, as they are not then able to communicate effectively. This hinders positive relationships being formed.

For positive outcomes to be achieved, staff must have the skills to support such individuals, with effective communication being one of them. Again, this begins with training, something which the NAS promote across all aspects of their standards. The standards are not explicit when referring to social communication and interaction, however, it can be interpreted that if the standards are adhered to and the guiding principles followed, positive relationships can form, as other mechanisms such as effective communication, adjustments and effective support are already in place. This chapter explores this in greater detail, examining what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why.

## 6.3 Person centred provision in relation to social communication and interaction

This section will explore the adjustments, accommodations and person-centred planning Prison AA implemented to promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

### 6.3.1 Alternative methods of communication

The Equality Act 2010 s.20(6), places a legal obligation on all providers of public functions, including prisons, to ensure that all information shared is accessible and provided in a format which is understood by all. To aid understanding, easy-read or visual aids can be provided to all individuals at every aspect of the prison journey. Additionally, such visual aids can be presented around the prison to further assist with understanding. This is something that Fred recognised and discussed during his interview. He states, "they have a picture and a word next to the showers saying 'shower' and next to the savoury saying 'savoury'." Although Fred did not completely understand why such adaptations had been made to the environment, nor did he express whether he found them useful, it was positive to hear that the prison had introduced them. In their guide for Criminal Justice Professionals, the NAS (2011) has previously affirmed that providing information in visual and written format can help individuals with autism to better understand it, allowing them to make informed decisions. Fred was the only participant

within this study to describe such adaptations and although he did not recognise the purpose, it may still be useful and supportive to other individuals with autism, especially those with difficulties in literacy. Furthermore, implementing this form of accessible communication and information sharing is inclusive, allowing individuals with autism to develop an understanding of particular areas within the prison, as well as beginning to recognise and relate words to photos, creating independence. This is echoed in Zisk and Dalton's (2019) study on Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) for individuals with autism. Although they state that large quantities of research around AAC focuses on non-verbal children with autism, they can also be extremely useful for adults with autism, and those who can speak verbally. Zisk and Dalton (2019) argue that providing alternative ways to enable individuals with autism to communicate is highly beneficial and enables full participation, creating an inclusive environment.

It was identified within this study that several individuals with autism although they had speech, still struggled to appropriately verbalise, or express their wants and needs. This was evident for Carl and Billy, who were unable to express themselves and be understood, and consequently found themselves displaying perceived challenging behaviours. Alternative methods of communication are required if individuals with autism, including Billy and Carl, are to be successful in being heard. Emma reports, "the very first time I met Billy, he was struggling to vocalise what he needed to say … so I gave him a notepad and told him to write it down. He would write loads." Using alternative methods of communication, such as this, for individuals with autism is highly recommended to support an effective interaction, where both parties understand (NAS, 2020). Billy recognises his struggles with verbal communication and did verbalise that he is able to express himself better in written form. He stated during his interview that, "if I had a pen and paper, I would just write loads of things down for you." Although alternative methods such as this were available for all participants to use, Billy highlighted how he would need additional processing time as well as his desired environment, "I can't do it now, I can't explain myself, like if I had time and some paper, I would write it all down for you, but I would need to be in my cell, by myself." Due to time constraints and ethical considerations, this was not possible at this time, nor could I leave writing materials for Billy to complete later, due to him being released that day. Nevertheless, this does appear to be a helpful way of communicating his needs to staff on a day-to-day basis.

Emma also states that she advises Billy to write his feelings down in his notebook, when he recognises that he is becoming overwhelmed, frustrated, or stressed. Emma states she advises this as it can often reduce the risk of Billy becoming verbally aggressive and argumentative towards staff, due to his inability to manage his 'big emotions'. By doing so, this allows Billy to process the situation, reflect, as

well as reduce negative interactions. All behaviours are a form of communication, and if staff can identify triggers and recognise patterns in behaviour, they can implement adjustments to help support individuals with autism deal with difficult situations which cause stress, anxiety, frustration or can result in them becoming overwhelmed. Referring to Zisk and Dalton's (2019) study, although not based within a prison setting, they conclude how verbal communication does not mean effective communication that is understood by all involved, all of the time. They highlight how many individuals with autism report that they used written forms of communication, such as text messaging or notepads to express themselves and get their voices heard. They called for more awareness of the importance of AAC, and having these readily available for those who require it (Zisk and Dalton, 2019). Such strategies and adjustments are cost effective and easily transferable into a prison environment and would be in-line with the reasonable adjustment's duty imposed upon prisons through The Equality Act 2010. Such methods of communication have already proven successful for Billy.

### 6.3.2 Processing communication

Emma discusses how she is aware that Billy requires processing time when information is shared, or questions were asked. Sharing such knowledge is good practice, as it allows all other staff who support Billy to better understand his needs. Emma states that she has advised all staff to "count to six in your head, because that might be enough time for him to answer or ask you a question." Such adjustments were also evident in Murphy's (2010) study, where he quickly identified that his participants delayed responses indicating a need for additional processing time. Once this was given, interviews flowed better. Giving Billy additional time can allow him to have a greater understanding of expectations, instructions, and conversations, as well as make informed decisions about his own life and the day-to-day support he receives. It also may allow him to feel listened to, creating better relationships between him and staff. The NAS (2020) highlights how it is best practice that when giving verbal information to an individual with autism, especially about a change, an instruction or something important, processing time should be given to ensure they have understood. Additionally, The Equality Act 2010 s.20(6), places a duty on public functions to ensure that information is accessible, therefore when sharing information with Billy, staff must be aware of his needs to ensure he has understood.

### 6.3.3 Wing/Peer workers and advocates

During his interview, Jonathan referred to the work Emma does with Billy in supporting him to be heard, especially in important meetings such as interviews and probationary reviews. He states, "she's sat in interviews with him, he's had his probationary review, and she sat in with him as that calm factor and

acts more like an appropriate adult for him." An appropriate adult is a person who supports the rights and welfare of individuals classed as 'vulnerable', ensuring fairness and equality (Richards and Milne, 2020). They can be any individual over the age of 18, from family and friends to support workers or individuals appointed as appropriate adults (Richards and Milne, 2020). Due to personal circumstances, as well as Billy's interviews and meetings happening whilst he is in prison, having friends and family acting as an appropriate adult may present challenges. Nevertheless, Billy felt comfortable enough having Emma's as support. Emma explains,

"we discuss the things he wants and needs to say in these meetings prior to them happening, almost like practicing it. It gives Billy that processing time he needs, but also, I know what he wants to say so I can advocate for him if needed."

Richards and Milne (2020) tell us how appropriate adults present in interviews within the justice system are there to "offer advice and ensure that the interview is conducted fairly", having the power to intervene or stop an interview if they deem it to be inequitable. Emma can do this for Billy, as she knows what his thoughts are and how best to support him. Although she is not contracted or trained as an appropriate adult, nor is this her role within the prison, both Emma and Billy still feel comfortable enough for this support to occur during important meetings and interviews. Without such support, Billy may misunderstand certain questions or be unable to effectively communicate his thoughts, putting him at a substantial disadvantage.

Support mechanisms within prison for individuals with autism, such as advocates, accessible information, adjustments to education and work placements, processing time to name a few, all require continuation upon release if individuals are to be successful within the community. For Adam, this support may be required more so, as relationships with his family had broken down since being sentenced, therefore his network within the community was absent, and ultimately will change upon his release. This created additional anxieties for Adam, who admitted during his interview that he was concerned about his release. Discussions with Emma highlighted how the prison is working with external agencies to offer Adam support. She states, "there are support networks in place that are going to try and identify as much information for release as possible, to try and take some of those anxieties away." Here, Emma discusses how prison staff are 'going to try' liaising with probation services to share information which may prove vital for Adam upon release. The Equality Act 2010 requires probation services to make reasonable adjustments to support disabled people, prior to their release, as well as within the community. To do this, information sharing amongst services is vital (Criminal Justice Joint

Inspection, 2021), which initially needs to start with the prison as currently they accommodate the individual and should know their needs. Emma highlights how the prison “have three co-ordinators which can commit time to that, which wouldn’t usually happen on a main wing.” She continued to inform me how these co-ordinators work with Adam, and other individuals with autism on C Block, to contact and liaise with outside agencies and services to identify where Adam is most “vulnerable and at risk of getting himself back into trouble”. Adaptations and accommodations should then be put into place. However, research has suggested that due to limited resources and poor information sharing, individuals with autism are often not prepared for release (Bullock and Bunce, 2020; Chiu et al, 2018; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021). In their research on individuals with intellectual disabilities being released from prison, Chiu et al (2018) discovered that many individuals were told support would be available within the community, however, upon release, discovered that this was challenging to obtain, and information had not been shared successfully. As Bullock and Bunce (2020) state, the rehabilitative work, adjustments, and support which was implemented when in prison, needs to be mirrored upon release, with the transition being appropriately and effectively planned and facilitated as early as possible. Having co-ordinators on C Block, whose time is dedicated to ensuring local authorities are aware that an individual with autism, who requires additional support, is being released into their area, as well as liaising with social care and other services to share information and obtain support ready for release, can prove vital in preparing for a successful release back into the community.

As well as support from staff, peer support can also be significant in having individual needs catered for. As stated previously, individuals with autism still wish to seek out positive relationships with others (Crompton et al, 2020) regardless of associated difficulties with social interaction. For individuals asking for support, initiating conversations with unfamiliar individuals, or discussing personal issues may be challenging, therefore having a peer support network in place could be beneficial. Emma discusses this, stating that “we do now have like a buddy system in place, we have more buddies, it’s a quieter environment and there’s more peer listeners.” Walton et al (2022) discusses how peer intervention and support can be extremely beneficial, as they provide informative help, advice, and guidance, promote a sense of community as well as being cost effective. For individuals with autism in this study, their peers also have a diagnosis of autism, which could create a sense of understanding, awareness, and community (Crompton et al, 2020). In their research, Crompton et al (2020) discovered how their participants felt more comfortable when they were surrounded by other individuals who share their diagnosis.

Edward also spoke about his role as a 'Buddy' or 'Peer Worker', stating that "I used to help people out and everything. Like all those people who can't read and write, I would support them and help them fill out forms and shit." HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) share how the use of peer support workers in prisons for individuals with disabilities was positive, however, in some instances appropriate training had not been given, which resulted in inappropriate care and support. Neither Emma nor Edward mentioned any form of training for peer workers, regardless of the shared diagnosis of autism and the perceived greater understanding amongst each other. Although this is good practice and should be celebrated, appropriate support should also be offered to peer workers, who themselves may struggle with communication and interaction but are keen to offer guidance and support to others.

### 6.3.4 Segregation from non-autistic prisoners

The most significant and major adjustment the prison has implemented is the development of C Block. This wing was developed to house individuals with autism, enabling them to gain additional support whilst in prison. Consequently, this results in all individuals with autism being placed together, forced to live, eat, learn, and socialise with one another. Within their research, Crompton et al (2020) discovered that their participants felt more comfortable being surrounded by other individuals with autism, as it brought them a greater sense of awareness and understanding. Although this may be the case for some, it could be argued that a similarity in difficulties does not necessarily create social bonds or form meaningful friendships. This was evident in this study, with several participants, such as Billy, Fred and Carl, all providing examples of altercations with other individuals on the wing. Generally, these altercations were due to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, where communication has not been effective. Carl reports, "I told him to fuck off, because I wanted him to just fuck off, but he obviously didn't like that and squared up to me". Although it appears as Carl was indicating he wanted the conversation to end and the individual to leave his personal space, the way he verbalised this was interpreted as rude and offensive. This then resulted in his peer becoming upset, frustrated, and reacting physically. The communication difficulties typically associated with autism do not disappear when surrounded by others who also share such difficulties but instead could increase due to individuals with autism generally struggling to interpret verbal and non-verbal communication.

## 6.4 Interactions between individuals with autism and other prisoners

This section will explore the social communication and interactions between individuals with autism who participated in this study, and other prisoners. Such interactions will be slightly different due to opportunities limited, as individuals with autism are segregated on C Block.

### 6.4.1 Experiences of interactions with non-disabled people, prior to C Block

Prior to residing on C Block, all participants have experienced time on another wing or prison. Adam states how the first few months of his sentence he resided on A Wing, a mainstream part of the prison where he was forced to share a cell with an individual who stole his property. After the incident, he recalls, “he approached me and a couple of the other lads, and I was like I really don’t want to see you, and yes basically I ended up headbutting him and rammed him against the pillar.” Adam does not disclose what was said for him to react physically towards the individual, whether it was to antagonise him further or to apologise, however what is evident is that Adam was still distressed about the incident and not ready to address it but potentially struggled to appropriately get this message heard. Adam then reported that once he was calmer he tried to apologise for his physical behaviours, however, did not recognise that the other individual may not have been ready to discuss the incident. He recalls, “I asked to speak to him to apologise for my actions and I ended up getting assaulted by that person. I was doing the right thing, but he didn’t even say sorry for the first thing he did wrong.”. Vinter et al (2020) argues that individuals with autism in prison are at a greater risk of being targeted and victimised due to others recognising their social difficulties and taking advantage. This appeared to initially be the case for Adam, when his property was stolen, however further interactions resulted in physical assault, from both parties, and this may be due misunderstandings of the intentions and the emotions of each other. Nevertheless, what is more concerning is the lack of awareness amongst the prison population, as well as the lack of support for Adam who was subjected to theft.

Further discussions with Jonathan regarding Adam’s altercation highlighted how Adam desperately “wants to fit in … on A Block there was a small altercation with friends, if that’s what we can call them, but I think he was actually buying his friends and them [staff members] up there just allowed him to.” When questioned further, Jonathan explained how Adam would often offer his peers his food, TV or personal belongings, believing he was “helping” his friends, making them “happy”. This highlights a significant lack of awareness amongst the prison population, but also an alarming lack of support and neglect from staff. In their study, Forster and Pearson (2020) discovered how many participants felt the need to fit in, something which they refer to as ‘camouflaging’. The desire to obtain friendships can lead individuals with autism to display behaviours they believe are ‘socially acceptable’ and without appropriate support and a greater awareness of autism, it could leave many individuals isolated or targeted. Forster and Pearson (2020) also explored the experiences of some participants who reported being exploited by individuals they considered as friends. Although this could be perceived as ‘social vulnerability’, Forster and Pearson (2020) stress the need for structural and attitudinal barriers to be

appropriately dealt with to reduce the risk of exploitation, harm and negative social experiences for individuals with autism. In Adam's case, staff's inability to support him to understand appropriate social interactions that do not involve "buying friends" as well as intervene when non-disabled individuals are accepting these 'gifts' may have contributed to his negative social experiences. Staff need to explore appropriate explanations for behaviours, rather than labelling it as challenging, disruptive, or disobedient (Slokan and Ioannou, 2021).

Other forms of 'fitting in' within prison are participating in perceived negative behaviour to 'impress' others. As previously discussed, this is referred to as 'camouflaging' where individuals with autism copy the behaviours and interactions of others to try and fit in (Forster and Pearson, 2020). In his interview, Daniel discussed how he previously found himself participating in negative situations at the requests of his peers. He states, "when I first started coming [to prison] that's all I would do you know, just punch people up … people used to say, 'oh just go and do this to him' and I would just say yes, all the time." Although Daniel does not recognise it, his desire to fit in and 'be a good friend' does suggest that he was previously a target of victimization and manipulation, being used for the satisfaction and personal gratification of others. McAdam (2009) has previously highlighted how many individuals with autism in prison find themselves being a target of bullying, manipulation, and victimisation, often without realising it or being able to successfully communicate this to staff. Allely (2015) later echoed this, suggesting that an individual's ability to recognise and respond to social situations where perceived negative behaviours may be participated in, can result in further sanctions and act as a barrier to a successful rehabilitation. It appears as though Daniel's actions may have been a result of his desire to 'fit in' with his environment and the attitudes and behaviours of those around him. Since moving to C Block, Daniel reports of no physical altercations, suggesting that with appropriate support, increased awareness and understanding from staff and other prisoners, Daniel can find better and alternat ways to interact with his peers without the need to participate in perceived negative behaviours at their request.

Carl also made suggestions which highlighted his inability to recognise appropriate social behaviours and interactions. He states,

"they my friends, if they ask me to do it, I probably would. If somebody put a gun in my hand and said, 'I would give you £1000 to go shoot this guy in the face'. I would probably do it … and I wouldn't feel anything. Not sure if they would do it for me though."

Carl openly discusses how he would commit a serious crime for his 'friends' but acknowledges that such actions may not be reciprocated. Even with this acknowledgement, he appears to still consider them as friends, suggesting his perception of what constitutes as a 'good friend' may differ from the average persons. This was also present in a previous study by Paterson (2008) who discussed Paul, a participant who proclaimed to have a lot of friends, however, through observations it appeared as though Paul had difficulty recognising when his 'friends' were ridiculing him. Additionally, Paul also disclosed an incident where his 'friend' stabbed him in the face. Although Paterson (2008) does not go into detail about this, it could be suggested, as with Carl in this study, that difficulties in reading and understanding appropriate social behaviours, coupled with the desire to maintain friendships, could act as a barrier to recognising manipulation and exploitation. For Carl, his desire to satisfy his friends without concern of the consequences for himself, knowing such behaviours would not be reciprocated, highlights a power imbalance between non-disabled people and individuals with autism, one which may lead to further manipulation and abuse. Some argue that this perceived lack of social awareness, leaves individuals with autism socially vulnerable (De La Cuesta, 2010; Lewis et al, 2015; Paterson, 2008), however, as Forster and Pearson (2020) highlight, 'mate crime' can only be prevented if structural and attitudinal barriers are properly explored and dealt with.

### 6.4.2 Social Hierarchy

Deal (2003) discusses categorisation of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled', highlighting how within such categories, a hierarchy of impairments appears to be present. Although disabled people, collectively, continue to fight for equality, Deal (2003) discusses how within the category 'disabled people', impairments are also categorised or 'ranked' and this tends to be based on factors such as strength, physical needs as well as learning needs. Within this study, Fred does recognise his additional needs and the support he requires, however, also appears to 'rank' himself higher on the social hierarchy than others who he perceives to need greater support; such as Daniel. Fred appears to 'pity' Daniel because of his learning needs, using what could be perceived as derogatory language. Fred states:

"Take poor Daniel for instance, he needs a lot of support to like fill in forms, read a book, even write his name, yet he's expected to just leave here and go find a job. He be a good boxer though, lad can throw a punch!"

Although I do not believe Fred used harmful language to intentionally upset others, there did appear to be a lack of understanding around the negative connotations attached to them. This was further evident when Fred made a comment about another individual residing on the wing;

"he's a bit weird. He's up there on the top wing you know. Like he is 35 but has like the mental age of a 10-year-old. Like he's harmless he's just a bit creepy. Nobody talks much to him, he's kind of a loner, I just stay away and talk to my mates."

De-Viggiani (2018) has previously suggested that individuals in prison can often use inappropriate or derogatory language to 'fit in' to a particular friendship circle. However, in Fred's case, it appears more as though there was a 'hierarchy of impairments', which was based on social interaction and cognitive abilities.

Billy reported how he attempted to stand up to disablist hate speech but became frustrated. He states, "Like the other day somebody just came up to me when I was getting food and called me a mong, so I was like, 'you what?' and he said it again, so I pushed him." Although Billy's response could be deemed as more serious, due to the physical aspect, it does raise concerns around whether Billy was targeted or victimised by other individuals, something which is prominent in prisons (Allely, 2018). Talbot (2008) has previously highlighted how individuals with autism are at greater risk of victimisation, due to misunderstandings and lack of awareness, but in this instance, it was another individual with autism who used such language towards Billy. This highlights how sharing common experiences does not necessarily result in positive interactions and relationships. Furthermore, it does highlight the lack of understanding around such disablist language amongst individuals with autism. Due to Billy's physical part in the situation, he received a sanction, however, this does not challenge or repair the initial problem, which may result in Billy's actions being repeated if he finds himself in a similar situation. It was not identified why Billy was a target of such disablist language, however, it was suggested that Billy's perceived 'social status' amongst the wing may have impacted him becoming a target. This highlights that segregation and being surrounded by others who also share a diagnosis of autism does not work for all, but instead, can still create a social hierarchy, with disablism still occurring.

### 6.4.3 Peer Mentoring

The role of a peer mentor has always been highlighted as a positive way to engage others in meaningful activities, stay out of trouble as well as offer emotional support from somebody who has a similar experience (HM Inspectorate of Prisons and HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). In their review, HM Inspectorate of Prisons & HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021) discovered that many prisons participating within their study disclosed that peer mentoring support was available for individuals with autism (and other identified neurodiverse conditions), which involved helping with daily tasks and offering emotional support. Within this study, Edward spoke about his role as a peer mentor, explaining

how he supports other individuals with autism on the wing; “because I can read and write, and they can’t, doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t get the stuff they are entitled to because these fuckers aren’t going to help them, are they? I will help them, I’m nice like that!” It is unclear whether Edward’s role was something he had been asked to do by the prison, or something he chose to do, recognising there was a need for his support. Nevertheless, Edward’s support may be welcomed by many within the prison.

For Adam, it appeared as though he benefitted from a peer mentor style scheme. Conversations with both Jonathan and Emma, as well as Adam, highlighted how he “interacts better with the other prisoners down here as they all have similar needs” [Jonathan] suggesting that in this instance, shared experiences is beneficial. Emma goes on to state that “we buddied him up with another lad on the wing and he kind of took him [Adam] into his social circle and helped him out with things.” This was reflected by HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) when they completed an inspection of Prison AA, stating that appropriate training had been delivered to peer mentors across the prison, however, a positive ‘buddy scheme’ was evident on C Block, with emotional and physical support being offered. Both examples provide positive experiences for individuals on the wing, both delivering support and receiving it. Such support can produce benefits for individuals with autism, such as receiving support faster, rather than waiting for a member of staff, forming positive relationships, as well as being able to confide in others who share similar experiences. Individuals must be able to offer support, or willing to accept it if such schemes and mentoring is to work successfully.

### 6.4.4 Positive interactions with other individuals with autism

For Edward, residing amongst others who share the same diagnosis appeared to be comforting. He proclaimed that he felt an increase in understanding and found interacting with them easier; “whenever I’ve come across other people with like, autism conditions and that, not just Asperger’s, I get on with them like a house on fire.” He discusses a utopia, where there is a community only available for individuals with autism, asserting that they would all know how to help each other, decreasing the challenges they face. He explains:

“My idea was just get loads of autistic people and start a community where we’re not getting fucking bullied and just do our own jobs, you know? Build our own roads, fucking, educate our own people, basically, just, like a self-sustaining, you know, you’ve got your own power, you’ve got your own, basically your own council, basically, just what goes on in the world, just with autistic people. So, you’re

not relying on people that want to erm, erm, erm, manipulate you, or use your, you know, disability of social anxiety and whatever against you and stuff, you know?"

When questioned whether this would leave such individuals isolated Edward appeared unable to answer the question as quickly, stumbling on his words, repeating them, and taking pauses, although he did reply, "people are just quite happy to sit in a fucking basement, playing online games and stuff … isolated anyway." Edward's response does not appear to promote isolation for individuals with autism as a positive thing, but instead suggests that he harbours anger, frustration, and resentment towards non-autistic individuals, potentially due to negative experiences. It is suggested here that Edward finds being around other individuals with autism can reduce his social anxiety, claiming that those without a diagnosis can use these difficulties "against you". This could be interpreted as though he feels that the lack of understanding, awareness, and acceptance from individuals without autism, who can potentially recognise the difficulties in social interaction will then use this as a way of manipulation, abuse, or harm. For Edward, this creates anxiety for him, when he is within company of non-autistic people. Social anxiety differs from general anxiety and is normally present when in social situations, something which has frequently been linked to individuals, mainly children and adolescents, with autism (Briot et al, 2020). Briot et al (2020) argues that for individuals with autism, whom have difficulties with social interaction, they may experience more negative social situations with people who do not share a diagnosis, which contributes towards increased social anxiety. Therefore, some have suggested that interacting with other individuals with autism may bring comfort and relief as interactions may be easier to interpret and follow (Crompton et al, 2020) resulting in fewer altercations, misunderstandings, and conflicts (Sinclair, 2010; Vinter et al, 2020). Despite this, the one friendship in prison that Edward referenced was with an individual who did not have a diagnosis of autism. When asked about this, Edward replied, "he was one of the good guys." Positive social interactions can occur when individuals share similar interests and are receptive to each other's needs. For individuals with autism, such interactions can help reduce social anxieties (Sinclair, 2010).

George explained how he knew individuals within the prison upon entry, which made settling in slightly easier. He states, "I knew a few people when I got to this wing, isn't it. I didn't know anyone in [Another prison], so when I come to this jail it was a bit better, you get me?" George continued to suggest that he has made new relationships since being in prison, however, are not necessarily meaningful, "I wouldn't call them friends or anything, just people I speak to … don't really speak to everyone isn't it. Still be humble with everybody though." Making new and meaningful friendships does not appear to be

George's priority but it does suggest that he has the appropriate social skills to interact with others in a friendly manor (De-Viggiani, 2018; Michalski, 2015). Being able to interact with individuals confidently and positively you reside with can support a positive mental well-being (Michalski, 2015) regardless as to whether everybody will be considered a friend. Being able to do this on a wing which supports only individuals with autism, has increased this confidence for some, however, it has not completely removed all conflicts but within a prison setting, this would be extremely challenging to do.

## 6.5 Interactions between individuals with autism and prison staff

This section explores the relationships between individuals with autism and prison staff. It examines how staff can successfully build and maintain positive relationships to promote positive outcomes.

### 6.5.1 "We're like a family" – The importance of positive staff relationships on C Block

Within this study, when positive relationships were established, some individuals with autism felt that staff became so important and close, that they were perceived almost like members of their family. In her interview, Emma referred to herself as "mother hen" when discussing her relationships with Billy. A mother is seen as one of the most important family members, a head of the household, a caregiver and somebody who offers unconditional love. It is evident that Emma perceives herself to offer such qualities to the individuals on the wing, providing genuine care, compassion and understanding for those she supports. It had not gone unnoticed by Billy, who in his interview states:

> "If I need to talk to somebody I will always ask for Emma. She helps me a lot and she always does what she says she is going to do. Most of the staff in here are fucking liars, but she's alright."

Tait (2011) argues that having genuine care is central to positive staff-prisoner relationships. This, coupled with greater awareness and understanding of autism, in this instance, has offered Billy some comfort, knowing he has a member of staff he can rely on and trust whilst in prison.

Daniel also spoke highly of the staff who support him, referring to them as members of his family, "Jonathan, he's like a dad isn't he? And there's Uncle Mike." A report commissioned by NOMS (2011) highlighted how when in prison, individuals begin to form their own 'families' and can do so with members of staff with whom they feel a sense of trust (Liebling et al, 2011). Some participants in their research disclosed the challenging relationships they have with their family, referring to members of staff who have treated them with respect, listened to them, and supported them through their prison journey, suggesting they are 'more like family than their real family' (Liebling et al, 2011). This may be due to the support they provide on a regular basis, which for some individuals may have been absent

during childhood (Liebling et al, 2011). However, extensive searches of online journal articles proved little to no research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of close bonds between individuals with autism in prison and staff, and how prison staff may be perceived to be as close as family members. Nevertheless, it is evident that participants in this study felt a close connection to certain members of staff, who they recognised took the time to support them, understand them and respond accordingly.

### 6.5.2 The impact of prison staff on C Block being 'Autism Aware'

Both Emma and Jonathan expressed their personal growth since working alongside the NAS, explaining how their knowledge, awareness and understanding has increased. Jonathan stated that this has positively impacted his relationships with such people; "I've made some great relationships with the lads, we get on well." This mirrored findings from Vinter et al (2020) study, where they highlighted how although awareness of autism varied across the prison staff population, there were some officers whose understanding and awareness was positive, which then allowed them to be better supported.

Daniel struggled to articulate how staff on C Block supported him better, but did recognise their positive support, stating, "I don't know, they just work with me a bit better, isn't it." Although this was not unpicked further with Daniel during interview, it could be interpreted that the greater understanding, awareness and acceptance for individuals with autism has allowed staff to 'work' with Daniel more successfully than previously and this is something he had noticed, commenting on an improvement on his behaviours as well as the close bonds he had formed with staff. Evidently, having close bonds worked for Daniel and supported him to make positive choices.

It has been argued that prisons are places of mistrust (Robertson and McGillivray, 2015), however, it was evident that participants within this study had begun to trust staff, so much so, that they felt comfortable enough speaking to them about their private life. When discussing Adam, Jonthan informed me of the distressing incidents which had occurred whilst on A Block, however stated that since moving to C Block, "he's got a much better rapport with staff, and he is a totally different person". Jonathan believes that this is due to "people have a better understanding down here" with Emma echoing this stating "everybody down here takes the time to get to know the lads on a deeper level". An awareness of individual needs, coupled with genuine care, empathy and compassion helps build trusting relationships (Tait (2011), supporting a successful rehabilitation and creating positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

Jonathan also states how his relationship with Adam has drastically improved, discussing how Adam feels comfortable enough to share invaluable information. He reports, “He has given me snippets of information and stuff about what stuff is going on the wing that can be quite detrimental to other potential staff assaults or something bad is going to happen”. This could be perceived as betrayal, with Gormley (2022) highlighting how this can lead other prisoners to assume disrespect and disloyalty, ultimately putting them at physical risk. During his interview, Adam stated, “stuff happens on this wing sometimes and it’s not right … I just tell one of the staff, sometimes Jonathan … I don’t want to get myself in any bother”. This suggests that Adam does feel comfortable seeking out staff when he identifies an issue, however, may not necessarily recognise how this could be perceived by other individuals. Nevertheless, Adam appeared confident in communicating with staff on C Block and their abilities to appropriately handle difficult situations.

### 6.5.3 Effective communication

All participants within this study spoke highly of at least one member of staff on the wing, with whom they felt comfortable with. Adam stated, “majority of staff are alright; I can chat to them. I tend to chat to these down here more than I do the other prisoners.” Although other individuals may perceive this to be a sign of betrayal (Gromley, 2022), for Adam, it appears to be a positive thing which helps him get through the day successfully. In their research, Vinter et al (2020) discovered that individuals with autism tended to surround themselves with others with similar needs, or who understood them. Although not all staff on C Block have lived experiences and can relate, they appear to have a greater understanding on how best to communicate effectively, making it easier for positive social interactions to take place.

Billy’s interactions with some members of staff appeared to be unsuccessful, mainly due to misunderstandings in communication. Billy stated how he felt that all staff are “just liars” giving an example of one member of staff who had promised to help him. He reports:

> “I asked her to get me some shoes for today [release day] and she was like ‘Yes, I will get you some.’ So, I asked her a bit later on because I still hadn’t heard anything, and she said ‘yes, I will get them in an hour’. So, I asked her again in an hour and she said, ‘yes by the end of the day’ and just sat there in her office playing fucking scrabble … just takes one fucking phone call.”

In Billy’s case, it appears that there was ineffective communication by the member of staff, who did not recognise that giving Billy a timescale of completion, and then this not being adhered to, would cause

him significant distress and dysregulation. Although Billy did not provide further examples of ineffective communication from staff, it does suggest that Billy is 'grouping' staff together; with one negative experience clouding his judgement on all staff.

Jonathan recalls an altercation between Billy and a member of staff, however, appears to pinpoint unsuccessful communication as the primary cause. He states,

"He spoke to a member of staff and in all fairness, she was a bit rude to him. He got angry and he turned around and he actually said to her something like I could actually break you neck or ill break your bloody nose or something … he obviously got seg for that."

It could be interpreted that this member of staff not only struggles to effectively communicate with individuals with autism and implement strategies to defuse challenging situations but appears to antagonise Billy further. This then results in socially inappropriate language being used and a consequence imposed. From a social model perspective, ineffective communication was a significant factor in Billy's perceived challenging behaviours. This coupled with the notion that individuals with autism can often struggle to identify, label and manage their emotions, especially in stressful situations (Dubin, 2021), resulted in Billy then being punished for something which could have been avoided.

During his interview, Edward stated that he felt victimised when a member of staff gave him an instruction, and then a different member of staff told him something else. This resulted in confusion and frustration for Edward, whereby he was given a consequence. This incident happened during COVID, a factor which contributed heavily to this thesis and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine. Edward recalls:

"I've still had incidences down here, to be fair, erm, I got asked to wait at the wing ball one time. To speak to a manager about an issue that I had with probation outside, and he was running about doing something else to do with D Block, you know, for whatever and that. He literally, his exact words to me were, 'wait there, I will come and speak to you.' So, I Waited there, I didn't get involved in nothing, it was all during COVID, people were out in the yard, wasn't talking to people at any doors, I wasn't getting involved in any bullshit, it's all on camera and that, yeah … [A different member of staff came over and said] 'I've got to bang up, you know?' And I was like, well yeah, I'm not a mug, I know what that means, I know that my issue isn't going to get dealt with. You think I ain't done, like, over 20 years in jail, in 31 different jails, and know the difference between 'fuck off, you're not getting sorted. Like I'm going to wait here, like I've been asked to do by somebody that's a higher weight than you, mate'. Do you

know what I mean? And I argued the toss with him for about half an hour. And then other members of staff started congregating, getting involved, and next thing I know, I'm getting dragged all over the floor, and all of a sudden, the manager has turned up again and is like 'what's going on here?' and I'm like 'I'm just waiting to talk to you and next think I know I'm getting told to get in my cell, like, I don't know."

It is evident that communication had drastically failed here, as Edward strongly believed he was following a direct instruction and when this changed, for reasons not relayed to him, he became confused, frustrated, and dysregulated. This then resulted in staff believing that Edward was displaying perceived challenging behaviours, and consequences were implemented. Often, individuals with autism may take comments and language literally (Vinter and Dillon, 2023) which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Some individuals with autism, who present with 'good' language skills, such as Edward, can often be perceived as having a full understanding of language techniques such as sarcasm or metaphors, and often this can lead to further frustrations (NAS, 2024b). As stated previously, this incident occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore additional rules, restrictions, and precautions were implemented, which could have impacted staff's judgment when noticing an individual 'waiting around' instead of locked in their cell or participating in their scheduled activity. Nevertheless, it is evident that a clear breakdown in communication occurred here and Edward frustrations with this, led him to experience negative interactions with staff. Consequently, such relationships have been damaged.

Within this study, multiple participants highlighted how staff on C Block listened to them. George felt that his relationships with staff had improved due to their ability to take the time to get to know him better. He states, "I don't know, it just feels more comfortable, doesn't it? Like people listen and take time out of their day to help you and stuff, just nice, you get me?" This has previously been reflected in Liebling et al, (2011) study, where they discovered that building rapport with individuals in prison was something officers found rewarding, and an aspect of the job they enjoyed as they felt more comfortable around them, even in challenging situations. They continued to state that positive relationships were formed on the basis of effective communication, with participants in their study reporting that staff listened to them, taking on board their thoughts and opinions to certain situations, which helped create a more respectful atmosphere. However, what Liebling et al, (2011) did comment on was how some individuals in the prison felt there was a lack of safety, with staff having less 'power and control' due to being perceived as friends, rather than a figure of authority. Although there are

benefits to positive relationships, there is still a requirement for staff to provide safety and control across the prison.

Information sharing and effective communication is key if rehabilitation is to be successful (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021). Within a prison, where things can change quickly, wherever possible McAdam (2012) states that warning should be given to individuals with autism, allowing processing time and reducing anxiety. When questioned about this, participants within this study recognised when staff communicated any changes of routine or inability to fulfil requests. Daniel stated, “yes, yes. All the time. And if they can’t then Jonathan comes to my cell and tells me about it”. Prison life can present challenges for individuals with autism (Allely, 2015) therefore having as much preparation when routine changes can relieve some of the added stress.

### 6.5.4 Advocates and providing support

Advocates can provide additional support for individuals with autism, especially when in prison. It is vital that advocates, who are mainly front-line staff, understand the individual needs and can effectively communicate these, when appropriate. Such support was evident in this study, with Edward stating that he has an advocate who offers support around applying for facilities within the prison, completing paperwork for parole, requesting changes to his routine as well as communicating his needs. Referring to a member of staff on the wing, he states:

> “she got me hooked up with an advocate, and that. So, yeah, she’s good, yeah. Like she helps me speak up to the right people and she keeps her cool, whereas sometimes I might lose it if they chat shit to my face. So yes, that’s good.”

Although not specific to prisons, Rendell and Eisele (2010) have previously called for more advocates across a range of services where additional support is required for individuals with autism to be successful in communicating their needs. However, they did report that individuals with autism, who appear to have good communication skills may struggle to access this support, but the need for it is no less (Rendell and Eisele, 2010). For individuals with autism within the justice system, access to such support may be increasingly challenging, consequently leaving many voices unheard. In Edward’s case, he appeared to suggest that this support was vital, especially in important meetings or situations where he may struggle to appropriately handle his emotions or articulate his thoughts and feelings appropriately.

### 6.5.5 Unsuccessful interactions with staff on C Block and the staff community

Not all relationships between staff and individuals in prison were positive. One reason for this was that some participants felt a lack of understanding and awareness from staff on the wing, with more needing to be done to combat this barrier. When discussing one member of staff on the wing, Fred states, "There's this one guy he just doesn't know how to listen man. He does not know how to work around people like me." Fred goes on to describe, in detail an incident during COVID, which he feels could have been avoided and a greater understanding of his needs, been present. He reports,

"I was going through bad times I was stuck in my cell, and I shouldn't have been stuck in my cell because I was working in savoury but whatever happened, happened. I told him I was going to kill myself. He told me, 'Don't be pathetic' and he slammed the door in my face. So, when he came back, I told him to go get me another screw and he said no. I said go get me the officer I was asking for, he said no, so I told him I was going to kill him. He just stood in my door just pulling this face and I'm like 'I'm being serious, just go away from me!' and he's just stood there with the door and I'm like [holds his arms out with his palms facing upwards] so I made it like I was going to run for him, and he slammed the door in my face. I was like, 'yes exactly, you fucking dickhead'."

It appears to be a significant misunderstanding, miscommunication, and lack of awareness of Fred's needs, in this situation. Although Fred was using inappropriate language, it was evident that he was dysregulated and this was not addressed, resulting in Fred becoming more frustrated. When asked whether this relationship could be repaired, Fred replied "No, he can fuck off, fucking dickhead he is." With reduced staffing levels being a primary concern (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2023); something which was also highlighted within this study, having positive relationships with staff who can successfully meet the needs of individuals in prison is vital, as they may be required to offer guidance and support at times when there may be nobody else present to do so. In her research, McAdam (2012) previously highlighted how individuals with autism in prison may have increased anxiety and stress, which can result in inappropriate reactions to certain situations which staff may perceive as 'challenging behaviours'. This, coupled with the additional stresses the COVID-19 pandemic brought (See chapter nine for greater details) could have resulted in a decline in Fred's mental well-being and he was unable to articulate this is a way which this member of staff perceived appropriate. It appeared as though Fred's social communication challenges may not have been taken into consideration, nor the significant stress and frustration he was feeling. Consequently, this did not result in a positive interaction and a relationship has broken down.

Billy also spoken negatively about some staff on the wing, stating “they fucking shit. They don’t fucking care! Just a job to them at the end of the day, pays the bills. I don’t like any of them, they all just liars.” Although Billy does later discuss his positive relationship with Emma, it is evident that his frustrations regarding some members of staff have created an ‘us vs them’ mentality, where he couples all staff in the same category. In their research, Liebling et al, (2011) discovered that participants felt they were able to identify members of staff who felt genuine care for individuals in prison and wanted to do well in their job. This suggests that the support offered, and communication style implemented may work for one individual, however, may not for another. Knowing the individual needs of all people staff are supporting, as well as having the skills to quickly adapt and implement de-escalation strategies, can help create better outcomes for individuals with autism.

Through interviews with Jonathan, Emma, and Mike, they disclosed that staff were previously frightened of Daniel due to his constant threats, aggression and abuse towards them, something which Daniel also spoke about during his interview. Jonathan states:

> “I think he’s been here nearly seven years now. So, he probably spent nearly four years on like an isolation wing where he was on a non-contact with people because he would make threats to staff or other prisoners, so they would lock him up for like eight hours with no contact with anyone … if he did interact with people it would generally be a violent interaction or be about violence. A lot of people would be scared of him so they would just bang him up.”

Although it is evident that Daniel was unable to appropriately communicate his needs, as well as staff being able to effectively support and understand him, it had previously still resulted in staff fearing for their safety, therefore Daniel being isolated. Such incidents, Daniel reports, caused negative relationships between him and staff, resulting in a cycle of re-offending. In their research, Liebling et al (2011) discuss a serious assault on two members of staff, whereby the police investigated and concluded the perpetrator had mental health issues. One participant in the study refers to how such assaults take place as staff are unable to effectively communicate and interact with such individuals in prison (Liebling et al, 2011). This does raise concerns around whether Daniel would have continued to exhibit perceived negative behaviours for longer, had trained and knowledgeable staff intervened and supported him better.

Crewe (2011) conducted research into the relationships between prisoners and staff, in all male prisons. He discovered that there was a difference in treatment between male and female staff, reporting that

some individuals in prison recalled their dislike towards female authority, which included prejudicial views about women, viewing them as sexual objects, untrustworthy and 'bitches' (Crewe, 2006). This was evident within this study, as Jonthan highlights how Adam appears to have a dislike to female authority, stating "he had more of a problem with female members of staff. He generally didn't like females telling him what to do, sometimes he would get a little more aggressive towards the females." Why Adam appeared to take a dislike to female members of staff was unclear, however during his interview, without prompting, Adam did refer to female members of staff during his interview, he states,

"When I was on A Block I was on that medication, and I was quite aggressive towards staff and on A block there's more female staff … a lot of the lads on the wing and a lot of the staff probably thought I was a feminist."

As this reference to female staff was unprovoked it could be argued that Adam does recognise the difference he felt being supported by female members of staff, however, cannot understand why but is trying to find an explanation. Crewe (2006) discovered that some individuals within his research, based their level of respect towards female staff on their views and relationships with women within the community, including partners, mothers, and grandmothers. Adam did disclose the difficult relationship he has with his family, including his mother, which appeared to cause him distress. However, Jonathan believes that Adam's response to female staff was due to sexual reasons, which he felt Adam was unable to understand and control such feeling and emotions. During his interview, Jonathan states,

"prettier female staff that he would have an altercation with … we didn't quite get to the bottom on that but there is a possibility that there may have been a physical attraction, and he didn't quite know how to deal with it."

Although Jonathan's assumptions are just that, it can be interpreted that Adam does feel a particular way towards female staff, compared to male staff, as he referred to them himself, without prompting. If relationships are to be successful with females, both in prison and within the community, Adam may need additional support to unpick his emotions towards females so that he can better understand them and be able to experience positive interactions.

Within this study, Carl disclosed that he felt there was a lack of awareness and understanding amongst the prison community, discussing how he felt his individual needs were not catered for. He states, "I have had some staff say to me, I don't care that you're autistic, you're in jail." Carl was very open about

his challenges in managing his emotions, especially in tricky situations, however, felt that staff fail to see his behaviours as a form of communication and consequently he receives harsh punishments. Here, Carl is clearly identifying direct discrimination and an ignorance towards his individual needs. Robertson and McGillivray (2015) discuss how a lack of awareness and understanding amongst prison staff can lead to misinterpretation's, on staff's behalf. This could also be the case if individuals have difficulty managing their emotions or successfully articulating their thoughts, which could then be displayed as negative behaviours (Ashworth, 2015). The prison standards promote training for staff, indicating that it would help create positive outcomes for individuals with autism. In Carl's case, this has not been successful, as he states, "I'm in seg now aren't I". Although Carl did not disclose why he was currently in segregation, his discussion around how feelings towards some staff's attitudes could suggest that autism awareness training does not always make staff more understanding, and personal attitudes, backgrounds and experiences need to be considered.

Stressful situations can be more prominent within a prison environment for individuals with autism (Vinter and Dillon, 2023) and consequently inappropriate language or 'challenging behaviour's' may be perceived as 'naughty' or 'disobedient', which can then lead staff to react to the behaviour presented. When interviewed, Jonathan referred to an incident with Adam, when he was on A Block, stating that "about 90% of the staff on A Wing, they just hated him. They thought he was vulgar, they thought he was destructive, they just thought he was playing the system." In his interview, Adam did discuss incidents with members of staff on A Block, which suggests that there was a lack of awareness of his needs, resulting in them perceiving Adam in a negative way. Tait (2011) describes how some members of staff can unintentionally form a group, an example being if one prisoner is rude or aggressive towards one member of staff, several then take a dislike to that individual. In her research, she discusses how staff reported that after being in the role for a period of time, they found themselves slipping back into 'negative talk' about individuals who they perceived as 'different' (Tait, 2011). This appeared to be evident for Adam, who reported one altercation with one female member of staff, however, Jonathan concludes that around 90% of staff then labelled Adam as 'vulgar'. This highlights a total lack of awareness and understanding of autism amongst some staff, creating a negative environment for Adam. Negative social experiences with staff did not allow Adam to form meaningful relationships when on A block, and consequently positive outcomes did not occur.

## 6.6 Community Relationships

This section will examine the relationships individuals with autism maintained with family and friends within the community. Although the interview protocol did not ask about such relationships, they were referred to regularly by participants, and it was felt important this was included as it can significantly contribute towards a positive rehabilitation (Farmer, 2017; Lanskey et al, 2019) and increased positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

### 6.6.1 The desire to maintain relationships with individuals in the community

When in prison, family contacts are a vital support network for individuals with autism (Hollomotz and Talbot, 2018), something which was evident within this study. Harry discusses how he still communicates with his mother often; "I speak with her regular … she writes me letters … When I get out, I'm allowed to go back and live with her." Having a fixed address which individuals can state as a residence prior to their release can add to a successful parole hearing, as well as demonstrating that they have a positive support network. Harry recognises his blessings in being able to maintain a positive relationship with his mother, and discusses how his partner, who was given the same sentence for the same crime, is unable to apply for parole just yet, due to not having a stable residence within the community. He reports, "I do have phone calls, I had one with my Mrs the other day … she might do a bit more time as she doesn't have a fixed address and she will have to go into a hostel, and they have to sort that." Although Harry does not explicitly discuss the benefits of maintaining positive relationships with his family, he is able to recognise how without one it can result in further negative experiences, such as an increase in a prison sentence.

Daniel spoke openly about his struggles with his parents as a child as well as the lack of contact he currently has with them. As discussed previously, Daniel did speak highly of his brother, who he has tried to regain contact with during his most recent sentence, "I mean by brother, he is like, he's my role model … he's like a father figure, he's been more of a brother to me, he's been like a best mate." As Lanskey et al (2019) states, families can be a great strength for individuals in prison as they can provide emotional support, encouraging them to 'stay on track' and comply with prison rules. Daniel described how he viewed his brother as a significant person in his life, playing a number of roles, and how this relationship has enabled him to continue to succeed whilst in prison; "I tell people I will learn and try, and I will prove to my family that I'm on enhanced like." Having a positive influence can support individuals to continue to make progress when in prison and continue to support them upon release.

One way to offer emotional support is via family visits to the prison. In this study, several participants referred to visits from a family member, with all appearing pleased. George states, “I got a visit coming up haven’t I, on 5th October, haven’t I? Next Sunday it is … [smiles] my mother.” In their study, Dixey and Woodall (2012) have previously highlighted how many participants found visits from family joyful and it would often lift their mood as it was something positive to look forward to. Before, and afterwards, it would give individuals a sense of belonging and provided them some form of connection to the ‘outside world’ (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). The Prison Reform Trust (2022) echoed this, stating that 47% of individuals in prison who sustain family contact and have regular visits are less likely to reoffend upon release, emphasising the importance of supporting individuals to maintain healthy and positive relationships. However, what is evident is that having a supportive network does not always prevent individuals from committing crimes within their community, whilst numerous factors such as their environment, social influences and economic circumstances contributing towards a reduction in re-offending. Harry and George both stayed with their mothers prior to their sentencing, highlighting how mistakes can be made even when a support network has always been present.

For Adam, it was evident that the desire to maintain positive relationships was prominent, but barriers affected this being successful. Adam discusses how the distance between himself and his family has resulted in him not experiencing a family visit. He informed me, “it was just difficult for me because if I was there, I was closer to my family, and my family live in [Town] so now I’m here my family aren’t able to come and see me.” Adam here appears to be discussing his conflict between the current prison environment or being close to his family. When speaking, he would often put his head down, looking at the floor, and go quiet, suggesting sadness about the situation. In their study, Dixey and Woodall (2012) discovered how many individuals in prison acknowledged that the distance between them and their families was a major barrier in their continued positive relationship, as they were unable to see them regularly. Furthermore, during this interview, Adam disclosed that he had just experienced a difficult telephone call with his mother; “I’ve just got off the phone with one of my family members and they are bit mad at me.” This phone call, resulted in Adam feeling “stressed again” because he had “just found out that I'm not welcome at my address.” Adam appeared anxious when recalling the conversation, suddenly twiddling his fingers, and looking at the floor. The emotional impact this will have on Adam could affect his rehabilitation, and release date, as he now does not have accommodation.

### 6.6.2 The support provided by C Block to maintain positive community relationships

Throughout interviews with staff, it was evident that support to rebuild, reconnect or maintain community relationships was restricted, due to factors such as length of sentence, willingness of other parties, and individual's memory about key information helping staff successfully locate people. Adam's family connections appeared important to him, but the recent phone call had shaken him. This was discussed with staff during their interviews, querying the support available for him. Emma stated, "if he was given more time with us, we would really look into getting him to connect with his family again because that is a huge problem for him." Advocation for an increase in an individual's prison sentence could be perceived as unethical, unjust, and immoral, however when community support is lacking, it could be argued that release back into society, when an individual is not completely prepared, increases the risk of re-offending. This highlights that the support individuals receive on C Block in relation to maintaining community relationships can be beneficial, however, for this to be completely successful, such support must be transferred and then mirrored within the community. Additionally, without a supportive community network, or stable accommodation, the risk of re-offending may also increase (Prison Reform Trust, 2022).

Daniel recognised and felt supported by staff when they helped him make contact with his brother, whom he perceives as a role model. He states, "helped me speak to my brother too, haven't they? Good of them, isn't it?" The importance of building family connections whilst in prison was recognised by the MOJ and HMPPS (2019) as vital, especially if an individual is to make meaningful progress, successfully rehabilitate and reduce the risk of reoffending upon release. They continue to state that it is the responsibility of all prison staff to support individuals to stay connected to family within the community, or begin to rebuild family ties, as they see individuals in prison on a daily basis, therefore can identify appropriate family members to contact as well as offer advice and support during difficult times (MOJ and HMPPS, 2019). Daniel informs me that Mike had helped him "fill out the visitation forms and stuff and write him letters." Such support can prove invaluable for individuals with autism and promote positive outcomes.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the social communication and interaction of individuals with autism with other prisoners, staff as well as individuals within the community. Key findings from the prison standards indicate that for positive outcomes to be achieved, effective communication needs to be present. Although this is not explicitly stated, interpretations as discussed in Chapter Four and the

beginning of this Chapter, indicate that communication and interaction is an important theme. The standards query how communication is successful, how information is shared and understood with minimal misunderstandings occurring, with all staff working together. This is something that was explored further in phase two, with findings suggesting an overall positive increase in effective communication. All participants interviewed could identify a key member of staff they felt comfortable enough speaking to about any issues that arise. This would indicate that participants felt heard, understood and supported enough to be able to identify such staff, and approach them when required. Not all interactions were positive, with some participants providing examples of when communication had broken down or misinterpreted. Such interactions suggest that for positive outcomes to be achieved for all, staff may need more than training opportunities. Having an awareness of an individual's personal needs can help remove communication barriers, as staff will be able to then implement strategies learnt on such courses.

It was evident that despite the associated challenges social communication has for individuals with autism, positive interactions still occurred, with relationships with staff being formed. This was not only down to positive communication, but also the consistency in staff. In a prison system that has significant concerns around staffing levels (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2023), maintaining a team of familiar staff could prove vital in building a trusting relationship for individuals with autism, especially given the associated difficulties such individuals have with social interaction. In November 2019, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons visited Prison AA, showcasing numerous examples of positive relationships, with 73% of individuals within the prison stating they believe they are treated with respect by staff who know them well and can respond appropriately to their needs (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2020). Although on a smaller scale, similar findings were evident within this thesis, with participants concluding that relationships between staff were meaningful and positive. This can create an increase in self-esteem and confidence as they feel more valued and respected (HM Inspector of Prisons, 2020). Participants did provide examples where relationships had broken down. Staff nor individuals with autism suggested that restorative justice techniques were used to rebuild such relationships, something which could be supported by other key staff. Such strategies could be used to rebuild relationships, minimising tensions, and anxieties across the wing. Furthermore, in an environment where staffing levels are a concern, it is important that individuals feel supported by those around them, especially if their key adult is not present.

Positive relationships between individuals with autism and staff appeared to be a factor in producing positive outcomes, so much so, that for some participants, they referred to staff as family. This mirrored findings from Liebling et al (2010) study, where they highlighted how many individuals felt staff were more like family 'than their real family' as they listened, offered genuine care and compassion as well as offered support to promote positive outcomes. Such attributes appeared to work for all individuals, when offered by different members of staff, with Daniel referring to several staff members as his family. Consequently, Daniel discusses his positive change in attitude and behaviour, with less emotional outbursts as is "smashing it" in education. However, as stated in Chapter Four of this study, Barney, a programme architect, expressed "what we don't want to do is make it so good that autistic offenders want to stay in prison". This highlights the significant need to not only provide effective support in prison but also ensure that a positive support system is in place, prior to release to enable this success to continue, especially if bonds that feel like family have been established in prison. Removing such relationships without positive alternatives could result in re-offending.

Due to being labelled as 'vulnerable' the current environment resulted in interactions largely being with others who also have a diagnosis of autism. Although some have argued that this may increase positive interactions (Crompton et al, 2020) findings from this study suggest that this is not always the case. Edward and Fred both shared grievances with other individuals on the wing. Fred discussed another individual with whom he felt aggravated by, due to what Fred perceived as 'creepy' and 'weird' behaviours. Informing me of instances where this individual has been shouting during the night, and Fred responding negatively out of frustration, does suggest a somewhat lack of understanding, and intolerance, of individual needs. This appeared to create an unintended outcome, where social hierarchy played a role within social relations on the Block. Isolating individuals with autism, from their non-disabled peers can create further divides, suggesting that those who are perceived as 'different' or in need of more support, should be segregated to receive this. It could be argued that although this may support positive outcomes for individuals with autism whilst in prison, it does not prepare them for life within the community, as it can be challenging to solely be surrounded by others with the same diagnosis as well as understanding staff.

What is evident is that although C Block can offer adjustments to promote positive relationships with trained staff, it does not appear to be addressing the attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers the prison causes for individuals with autism. Instead, segregation for support appears to be the approach. In some instances, this does promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism, as

communication is better shared, more meaningful relationships are formed, and they are surrounded by both staff and individuals who have a better understanding of their individual needs. However, this comes at the cost of inclusivity and equality, suggesting a medical model ideology. A greater awareness amongst staff and an increase in awareness of autism amongst the entire prison community could increase positive interactions between individuals with autism and their non-disabled peers. Only Edward, who called for an 'autism community', highlighted a positive interaction and meaningful relationship with an individual without a diagnosis of autism, suggesting that C Block operates very secluded and isolated from the rest of the prison. This can create a culture of segregation, rather than inclusion, resulting in non-disabled individuals sharing experiences with individuals with autism, due to their disability and the requirement for additional support.

Five out of eight participants within this study spoke negatively about their family connections. Strained relationships with family included abuse and neglect from an early age, with Adam also disclosing that his mother had just ended their relationship due to his prison sentence and her 'inability to cope' with his crime. The MOJ identify positive relationships with family and friends within the community as a key component in reducing the risk of re-offending (Farmer, 2017) both during their prison sentence and upon release. Whilst serving their sentence, it has been highlighted that prisons should support the rebuilding and maintaining of positive relationships within the community (Farmer, 2017), creating a network of support ready for release. However, for some individuals, as evident within this study, this is not always possible for several reasons such as location, length of sentence, family history as well as the willingness of the people involved. As with Carl, he disclosed that he does not have contact with his mother due to being in care during his childhood, or Fred who disclosed that he was physically and emotionally abused by his parents from an early age. Individuals who experience trauma within their childhood, mainly from parents who should offer protection, love and guidance, may be at greater risk of displaying perceived negative behaviours and finding themselves caught up within the justice system (Farmer, 2017). Negative lived experiences can instil poor self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, attributes which can then continue a cycle of abuse, substance misuse, and violence, which may result in a prison sentence.

Overall, having positive relationships, stemming from effective communication, links to an increase in positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Participants disclosed many examples where such relationships had supported their prison journey, allowing them to make positive choices. This needs to be mirrored not only across all aspects of the prison, promoting inclusion, but also within the

community and resettlement services, especially if individuals with autism are to continue their success upon release.

# 7.Chapter Seven: Adjustments to the environment, rules and regime

## 7.1 Introduction

The concept of reasonable adjustments, as outlined in Chapter Two of this study, stems from the need to ensure equality. In-line with the Equality Act 2010, public functions, such as prisons should take anticipatory approaches to identifying barriers to full inclusion, taking steps to remove them (Lawson and Orchard, 2010). Adjustments within prisons for individuals with autism is a key theme emerging through all aspects of this thesis and is a vital component in supporting positive outcomes for such people. Reasonable adjustments are not merely about compliance with legal standards, but more about fostering an inclusive and support environment that enables individuals to participate fully in prison life, with equal opportunities. This chapter explores this in relation to the prison environment, as well as the rules and regimes that directly affect individuals' daily lives, examining what works for whom, under what circumstances and why. During all interviews, photos of certain aspects of the environment were provided, offering a visual aid when discussing this topic.

## 7.2 Adjustments in the context of this study

Adjustments and accommodations were an integral part of the prison standards, as discussed in greater detail in chapter four of this study. Although the word ‘adjustments’ is used only three times within the standards, but there is a consensus that provisions need to be implemented if positive outcomes are to be achieved for individuals with autism. Each of the three sections explores a different part of an individual’s prison journey, querying the process of how adjustments are implemented within each setting to promote positive outcomes. The NAS promote a more knowledgeable and aware community of staff, who can use this knowledge to implement appropriate adjustments and accommodations.

The prison standards do recognise the impact the physical environment does have on creating positive outcomes for individuals with autism. As discussed in chapter four, the NAS refer to the sensory needs of individuals with autism, querying how prisons make accommodations to ensure these sensitivities are considered. They also refer to the rules, regimes and changes which occur within prisons, querying how individuals with autism are consulted with and supported, especially through the induction process, promoting a positive start to their prison journey. It is evident that the NAS believe without adjustments, accommodations and good practice, individuals with autism may not be as successful in obtaining positive outcomes, as barriers would prevent this. Taking into account the physical environment and the impact this has on individuals with autism is crucial if they are to be successful,

therefore, adjustments such as the use of ear defenders, quieter periods of the day, and the use of natural light can all support an individual's sensory sensitivities (Vinter et al, 2020).

## 7.3 The physical environment

This section will explore how the physical environment of a prison can directly impacts positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

### 7.3.1 Induction wing

The induction wing is the initial point of entry upon arrival at prison. Whilst present, individuals undergo various assessments, all of which should support a personalised support package with the aim to rehabilitate offenders. As discussed in detail in chapter four, the prison standards recognise the importance of the induction process in identifying and supporting individuals with autism. They called for an “induction and training programme” which prepared staff for the arrival of individuals with autism. With the development of trained staff, the prison standards believed that a more successful identification process could occur. Only three individuals discussed their time on the induction wing. Harry spoke positively of the staff who supported him, stating “they nice!” Whereas Edward and George had difference experiences. Both discussed how they felt staff did not listen to them, with Edward proclaiming a lack of awareness of his needs; “I told them everything! My autism and all that and some of the things I can’t do, like share a cell and stuff but they just don’t listen”. McCulloch (2012) has previously highlighted many communication barriers during the induction process into prisons. Although his study involved participants with a hearing impairment, the need for adjustments and recognition of individual needs is required if such people are to completely understand what is expected of them and obtain vital information during this stage. Effective communication at this stage could significantly contribute towards a successful rehabilitation (McCulloch, 2012).

When discussing the induction wing with George, he did point out that he was ‘accessed’ by “the lady on reception who comes out to talk to you and asks you questions about autism and like education and stuff.” This appears to mirror the prison standards, which query whether prisons “asking if they have a diagnosis of autism or Asperger syndrome”. Although this presents challenges for such individuals, as discussed in detail in chapter four, for George it does appear to be beneficial as he was then able to disclose his diagnosis and be directed to C Block to receive support, somewhere which he speaks highly of. As with Edward, being able to disclose personal information such as a diagnosis of autism triggered a pathway of support, which in Prison AA, resulted in residing in C Block.

### 7.3.2 C Block

The biggest and most noticeable change to the prison was the introduction of C Block. C Block was designed to house and support individuals with autism or displaying characteristics identified by staff. The prison, whilst working alongside the NAS, felt they were unable to meet the needs of individuals with autism within the mainstream part of the prison, with Emma stating, “they just wasn’t getting the right support that was helping them”. Consequently, such individuals are now segregated to receive the ‘right support’, with adjustments implemented to increase positive outcomes. The desire to introduce specialist wings to support the needs of individuals with autism has been recommended for many years (Allely, 2015; Woodbury-Smith and Dein, 2014), suggesting that such wings can promote a ‘better custodial’ experience (Allely, 2015). Other prisons have adopted a similar approach to supporting individuals with autism with HMP Wakefield introducing the ‘Mulberry Unit’ which was designed to implement targeted interventions, enhance social skills, create a greater understanding of their autism and their needs, as well as prepare them for life within the community (NHS England and NSH Improvement, 2021). Although individuals with autism do reside on the wing, it is not a permanent placement, with the aim to re-integrate such individuals back into the general prison population (NHS England and NHS Improvement, 2021). The specialist interventions and adaptations are beneficial for individuals with autism; however, both approaches to providing this do not support a social model perspective. Instead, this promotes segregation, difference, and isolation, taking ownership from all staff to support all individuals, regardless of their additional needs.

Despite this, the work and support offered on C Block evidently works for some. Daniel and Fred both discussed how C Block has been positive for them, with Fred reporting an improvement in his behaviour due to the adjustments implemented to the environment, behaviour policy and restrictions on social interactions with others across the prison who he states are a “bad influence”. Daniel was also confident in C block’s ability to support him, however struggled to articulate this, “just helped a lot more … not sure why or how, just has.” Conversations throughout the interview alluded to an improvement in Daniel’s engagement in learning as well as his attitude towards creating positive outcomes for himself. This appears to achieve C Blocks aim, which Emma states is “to offer more support to help the lads to rehabilitate and hopefully not come back to prison … but support in a way that suits them.”

### 7.3.3 Single Cells

During his interview, Jonathan discussed how the prison had made adjustments to accommodate individuals in single cells. He states, “everybody down here has their own cell, which is something that

isn't common across the rest of the prison, but we know that our lads need their own space and time away from everybody." Having their own space, small as it is, as well as the reassurance that they do not have to share whilst on the wing, can reduce stress and anxiety for individuals with autism. This was evident in this study, with all participants expressing their relief in obtaining a single cell, all for a variety of reasons. George discusses how previous negative experiences of sharing a cell has resulted in him preferring to stay alone, "he tried stealing off me and I didn't really take it too well … but now I can do what I want can't I, nobody bothering me." Edward also appearing to refer to a negative experience with a cellmate, states, "I have to have a single cell for a specific reason. That's to do with my autism … because of an incident when I was seventeen, I can't share cells." Whatever the reasons, all participants appeared to be pleased they no longer worry about who they will share such a small, enclosed space with. It has been highlighted in previous studies how important having a single cell can be for individuals with autism (Allely and Wood, 2022; Paterson, 2008). Paterson (2008) discovered that, for a variety of reasons relating to social interaction and communication as well as noise levels and sensory sensitivities, a participant in his study would reside to his cell as a way of regulating his own emotions; trying to calm himself down and remove himself from stressful situations. This adjustment to prison policy creates a sense of reassurance that individuals have their own space which they can reside to when appropriate, can help reduce overwhelming and challenging situations as well as perceived negative behaviours. This may have been a different experience, had Paterson' (2008) participant had to share a cell.

Although Daniel appeared to be happy with his single cell, he did report a sense of loneliness; "I mean I do prefer it like this but sometimes I do think I wish I had somebody to talk to like, get a bit lonely and that." Regardless of the associated difficulties with social interaction for individuals with autism, the desire to seek positive interactions with others is still prominent (Crompton et al, 2020). More so, research has suggested that positive interactions can contribute towards a reduction in mental health concerns (Kyprianides and Easterbrook, 2020), especially in a prison setting where individuals can become isolated and lonely due to being around unfamiliar people and away from loved ones.

### 7.3.4 Sensory sensitivities

Individuals with autism may experience sensory sensitivities (Allely and Wood, 2022; Vinter et al, 2020), which can be increased within an unfamiliar environment such as a prison (Allely, 2015). As previously highlighted, the introduction of C Block was designed to support the needs of individuals with autism, including their sensory needs. Emma states, "it's a quieter environment down here." The unfamiliar and constant noises within a prison may be challenging for some individuals with autism, however providing

a specialist wing where such things are taken into consideration may enhance positive outcomes. Additionally, Prison AA introduced a sensory room; a safe space on C Block designed to utilise during overwhelming times, or when a break is needed. Within this quiet space, sensory needs are catered for providing low level lighting, calming music, fidget toys to name a few. Trained staff are also on hand to help talk through any issues, concerns, or problems the individuals on C Block may have. Daniel appears to enjoy this provision, stating that "it's got lights and stuff and plays music and makes you fall asleep." Originally commissioned to improve inpatient sensory environments for young people with autism and/or mental health needs, mainly hospital and healthcare settings, the National Development for Inclusion (2020) set out 10 key recommendations. The autism team at NHS England adopted these recommendations and help implement sensory-friendly wards in healthcare establishments. The recommendations outlined called for trained staff, who are knowledgeable and aware of the sensory difficulties individuals with autism face, as well as stating that environments should take into account predictability and accessibility, have designated spaces available to reduce sensory overload, consideration of noise and lights alongside implementing personalised risk assessments and plans to ensure individual needs are met (NHS England, 2022). Such recommendations could also be transferred into a place of detention, something which Prison AA have introduced by opening C Block as well as a sensory room, which appears to be benefitting the individuals it is designed to support.

George also spoke positively about the environment on C Block, as well as some of the sensory adjustments and accommodations made. He refers to the smaller rooms C Block have, which he can utilise throughout the day to participate in purposeful activity with his peers. He states, "it's nice and quiet and calm in here. There's space to chill out but can also sit at the table and do work if I have to." Here, George is referring to the room where all interviews were conducted, which offered specific areas clearly set out for different purposes; a beanbag area for 'chilling', with the lighting being switched off in that corner, tables and chairs grouped together, a computer station as well as wall displays presenting some of the individuals work and achievements. In her book, Beaney (2020) refers to classroom learning within school, stating that for individuals with autism to be successful, spaces must be uncluttered, easily identifiable, labelling correctly and with a designated space, especially when a sensory break is required. The same principle can be applied to a classroom learning space within a prison, and in this instance, appears to work well for George who can easily identify the different areas within the room and what he uses it for. This accommodation promotes good practice, under the Equality Act 2010, benefitting individuals with autism by reducing stress and increasing engagement.

### 7.3.5 The classroom environment

Through observations during the interviews, it was also apparent that, visually, the classroom has changed. During the first visit to the prison, it was observed that the walls within the interview room were a dull magnolia, with no displays or notices. This appeared to be the case for the other two classrooms. Discussions with Adam highlighted how this was also something he had noticed and later recommended as an improvement. He joked, "I think we need Dynamo down here … anything is better than this, cause a headache just staring at that dirty colour all day." Jonathan also made comment about the colour of the walls, who stated the "classrooms will eventually look nicer than this, we have only just moved in so one step at a time." Upon the second visit, although it was evident that classrooms had visually changed, with more displays and information on the walls, the new colour scheme was still disliked by some individuals. Fred referred to the colour of the classroom walls, stating,

> "this is what's bugging me at the moment, yes. It's a man's jail and they fucking painting is purple, pink, and fucking orange, yes. It's a man's jail! They keep saying 'oh its therapeutic'. Bullshit! Let's get some blue up there and some greens, you know what I mean?"

The Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report (2021:44) refers to "painting walls in calming colours" as an adjustment, suggesting this would create a more "suitable environment" for individuals with autism. Although the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021) does not offer suggestions on what colours would be considered as 'calm', generally blues and greens are recognised as colours which can support a reduction in stress and anxiety, promoting a sense of calmness. Nevertheless, for Fred the current colours almost appear to offend him rather than provide a therapeutic and calming environment, with him protesting he is not "learning anything in those pink fucking classrooms."

Adjustments to the physical environment of the classrooms had appeared positive for Daniel, who, with a smile, drew attention to one of the pieces of work on display behind him, confirming, "that one is mine, fucking worked hard on that shit." Daniel never referred to the colour of the walls, however, did appear proud of himself and the work he had achieved which was now on display for all to see. Displaying work produced by individuals within the classroom can promote a sense of self-worth and increase confidence, as it appeared to do here for Daniel. Generally, prison classrooms are kept minimal, with only required information being displayed on the walls. This could continue to help individuals with autism to stay engaged within education, giving them a visual reminder of their achievements, promoting a greater sense of self-worth.

## 7.4 Rules and regimes

Prisons within the UK are bound by many laws and legislations which affect the way they run daily. For individuals with autism to be successful within prison, adjustments and accommodations are required to such legislation, promoting an inclusive environment free from discrimination. This section will explore the adjustments and accommodations made to the rules and regimes in Prison AA to ensure the individual needs of individuals with autism were met.

### 7.4.1 Behaviour policy

Fred recognised the adjustments to the rules staff on C Block made for him, mainly relating to his language during times of distress. Fred reports that he feels staff are more "lenient" with him. When questioned about this further, he states, "they don't have a go as much and if your mad and lose your shit, they don't jump on you straight away." He continues to explain, "if I lost my head and speak to one of them screws like I speak to these lot down here, I'd be fucked! Like obviously, these understand that you can't just treat everybody the same." The NAS (2022) discusses how having staff who can recognise that aggression and perceived challenging behaviours, can be a form of communication rather than disobedience, they are then able to make adjustments to the rules and regimes to offer additional support rather than punishment. This can reduce the risk of difficult situations escalating. Emma recognises the importance of understanding individual needs and responding appropriately. She informs me that the behaviour policy "works slightly different down here, like they don't get put in seg straight away or get a consequence, like withdrawal of privileges … we try to give them time to reflect then speak to them about the situation." Taking into consideration the context as well as having the awareness of individual needs allows staff on C Block to react differently to situations which may result in consequences if such behaviour or language was displayed elsewhere within the prison. This would be considered an adjustment, as staff are ensuring that individuals with autism are not punished or penalised for reasons relating to their autism but instead implement a system where processing time and reflection is advocated.

### 7.4.2 Daily routine

McAdam (2012) points out that individuals with autism can have great difficulty with inflexibility of thoughts and behaviours, working best when clear routines and expectations are in place. However, to provide efficient support, staff in prisons need to be flexible with their approach. Although Edward did not recognise it, allowing him to spend most of his day in his cell, is an adjustment to the prison policy. Whether this is in his best interest is debatable, however, the prison offers Edward the choice. He

states, “I do nothing now, just sit in my cell all day … they [staff] just leave me alone.” Edward did not state whether this was something he enjoyed, but rather more that he felt this was a necessity to ensure he does not find himself in any further altercations, prior to his probation review. Although the prison has implemented accommodations that are person-centred, and requested by the individual, it does appear that the reason behind Edwards self-segregation has not been explored or efforts made to overcome the situation, which may have been more beneficial than residing in his cell alone. This type of accommodation appeared successful in Paterson’s (2008) study, where Paul, one of the participants, was permitted to remain in his cell after lunch due to difficult experiences with his social interaction. Paterson (2008:55) reports how Paul had been involved in fewer altercations with his peers and his “aggressive outbursts” had decreased. Although this may support Pauls emotional regulation, as he is not feeling as frustrated, the reason for a decrease in altercations was the increase in time spent in his cell; fewer opportunities to interact hence altercations occur. This does not support a social model approach, but instead appears to suggest that segregation and isolation, with minimal interaction, reduces aggression and frustration. . This does not appear to address the barriers to full social inclusion. Nevertheless, Edward’s choice to remain in his cell was permitted, an adjustment to the rules and regimes of the prison. What might work best for Edward is regular check-ins, support, and encouragement from key staff to participate in activities, interactions, or education to fulfil his day.

During his interview, Adam discusses how he can become extremely frustrated when his daily routine is affected by the actions and behaviours of other individuals on the wing. Although he appears to try and understand, and sympathise with their reasonings for their actions, Adam still presents as frustrated by the disruption. He reports,

> “sometimes they can be doing it for other reasons and sometimes the lads can be sat on the bars, and we can be behind our doors for anything up to 2-5 hours. That has repercussions on our food timetable, our association timetable”.

Vinter et al (2020) discovered similar findings, highlighting how their participants found the unexpected changes to the daily routine extremely stressful and frustrating. They report how many individuals with autism found it more challenging when they were unable to immediately learn *why* the change had occurred, which in some cases led to an increase in anxiety. In his interview, Jonathan reports how he had noticed some of the individuals becoming frustrated in their cells during ‘lock-up’ and states how he “would go and chat to them, tell them what’s going on and stuff. Just distract them from being stressed and frustrated … that’s the good thing down here, we have a bit more time to do things like this”.

Dedicating more time to explain situations, have more conversations and complete more health and well-being check-ins could prove vital for individuals with autism (Vinter and Dillon, 2023) and help produce better outcomes. Additionally, supporting individuals to understand the chance has occurred could also reduce anxiety and frustration, especially on C Block, where all individuals have a diagnosis of autism and may require flexibility and adjustments, which could in-turn affect the running of the prison day.

### 7.4.3 Healthcare

Adam consistently referred to healthcare and their shortfalls in providing him with the correct and most efficient support that he felt he required. He explained how often they are given their "meds at half past eight in the morning and then we get given our meds then at like three o'clock in the afternoon … the next morning then we got given them at half past ten". He reports how these inconsistences in times often results in "some of the lads kicking off". During Emma's interview, this was discussed further, and she acknowledged the need for individuals with autism to have a consistent routine, especially for medication. She states that during my interview with Adam, "C Block was very new, and we took those comments on boards so there's specific times now that the nurses are allocated to come on … so long as they are not short staffed". HMI Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2023) highlights how there are still implications for individuals receiving medication on time, in prison when there is a staff shortage. The Care Act 2014 states that prison healthcare should mirror that of the community, however being unable to obtain personal medication due to staff shortages fails to provide this. Upon discussing medication during the second visit, Daniel reports how his morning routine is the same each day, "its meds first init. Get my meds early". When questioned whether this was the same time every day, he responded, "Yep! Same time every morning." Both Daniel and Adam only reported dealings with healthcare for medication purposes, therefore implementing adjustments to ensure C Block receive their medication first has produced a different experience for Daniel, compared to Adam, highlighting a reactive response to implementing accommodations for individuals with autism.

During the second visit to Prison AA, all participants discussed a 'learning disability nurse'. Although their role appeared to vary amongst all individuals, it appeared as though she offered a range of health support services. Referring to her as a 'support worker', Harry disclosed that not long after he transferred to C Block, she sought him out and offered support, "Since I come down here a support worker comes down here to see me and she said she is going to chase the health people about support for my anxiety." Edward refers to her as a "learning disability nurse" stating that "she's like a helper but

not one on the wing … she kind of chases things up and that … she's chased things up for me with my glasses". NHS England (2021) emphasize how individuals with autism are more likely to be unable to access appropriate healthcare when in prison. To help combat this, they suggest that prisons employ 'learning disability nurses'. Their role is to support individuals with autism to gain appropriate and timely access to healthcare services within the prison, taking a person-centered approach and offering autism specific expertise to other staff across the prison (NHS England, 2021). In the group interview, both Mike and Jonathan referred to the learning disability nurse as "a fantastic addition to the team … a service which wouldn't be offered on the other wings". Employing an individual who is dedicated to offering guidance and advice on health, as well as appropriately and efficiently communicating with other healthcare professionals, is an adjustment which increases links between individuals with autism and healthcare, providing greater opportunities to obtain support as well as ensuring that they do not experience discrimination for reasons relating to their disability.

### 7.4.4 Change

Individuals with autism are typically known to have difficulties managing change (Vinter and Dillon, 2023; Vinter et al, 2020), especially if this change is unexpected and prior warning has not been given. This was something that was recognised quickly by the staff at Prison AA, with adjustments being put into place to support this. Referring to Adam, Jonathan states "he just needs time to think about things so if his routine is changing, we try and tell him about it … he goes away and comes back with a million questions." Within a prison environment, where regimes can frequently change without any prior warning (Allely and Wood, 2022; Vinter and Dillon, 2023) individuals with autism may experience high levels of frustration, stress, and anxiety. This can then present as perceived challenging behaviours, which could result in negative consequences (Mouridsen, 2011; Paterson, 2008). Vinter et al (2020) details how one participant expressed their frustrations when their routine suddenly changed, which resulted in them using inappropriate language. Although they were alone in their cell, such behaviours and language can sometimes overspill when individuals are permitted to return to their routine.

Vinter et al (2020) argue that dysregulation through change of routine can often be linked to poor communication, as information has not appropriately been shared with the individuals it directly affects. This would be considered a failure of s.20(6) of The Equality Act 2010, where prisons have a legal duty to ensure that information shared is accessible and understood by the recipient. Not sharing valuable information could also be considered a failure. Change cannot always be prepared for, therefore knowing how to make adjustments and accommodations, where staff alert individuals with autism of

any changes in as much advance as possible, but also inform them of the reasons why can contribute to a decrease in stress, anxiety, and frustration. This appeared to work for Adam in this study but was also evident in Allely and Wood (2022) study, where their participant stated that certain officers will always make efforts to inform him of any changes to his day, something which was appreciated.

## 7.5 Barriers and limitations

C Block appears to work for all participants within this study, albeit in different ways, however, what was evident was that the lack of similar adjustments across the entire prison community would result in many other individuals with autism, who have been missed, are not receiving efficient support. This was evident when participants discussed the learning disability nurse, who only supports the healthcare of individuals on C Block. Such services can prove vital for individuals with autism in obtaining appropriate and effective healthcare, however, for many whom may have been unable to unwilling to disclose their autism, and without trained staff on the induction wing who can identify typical characteristic of autism, many may reside in the mainstream part of the prison, which does not support an inclusive agenda.

Other individuals within the mainstream part of the prison may perceive C Block to receive 'special treatment' creating a sense of jealousy, or treat individuals with autism differently, due to perceiving them to be of a 'lesser status' and in need of specialised care and treatment. This can create a social hierarchy (De-Viggiani, 2018). Carl, who discusses his time spent in segregation, states how he is happier on C Block due to increased support but has heard some individuals refer to the wing as "the spesh head wing" or the "special needs wing". Although Carl did not make any comments regarding this language, such derogatory words can deter individuals with autism in wanting to reside on the wing or interact with individuals outside of the wing when opportunities arise. This also appears to suggest that there is a lack of autism awareness and understanding amongst the prison population, something which does not support a social model perspective. It raises concerns about the desire for all staff to be 'autism aware' as some staff may be less motivated to support such individuals, especially if they do not see them daily as they reside on alternative wings, which they do not support on.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored the accommodations and adjustments Prison AA implemented to ensure individuals with autism were not put at a substantial disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers. Although a significant number of accommodations were identified as good practice, all may have been informed and guided by the reasonable adjustment's duty, under the Equality Act 2010. It is

evident that, in some cases, Prison AA appeared to be ‘reactive’ rather than ‘anticipatory’, learning from personal mistakes, listening to individuals about their negative experiences and identifying what is currently not working and adapting it. Yet, individuals with autism within this study, still overall appeared pleased and happy that the prison were making accommodations to meet their individual needs, even if a negative experience may occur prior to an adjustment being implemented. These experiences are what the two programme architects, interviewed in the scoping study of this thesis (see chapter four) refer to as ‘learning and reflective training’; where staff learn through reflection upon past experiences. Although this thesis does not dispute the benefits of reflective learning, it does argue that a more anticipatory approach to implementing adjustments across the entire prison, not just on C Block, could increase the positive outcomes for individuals with autism, as it may reduce their negative experiences.

The overall aim of implementing adjustments and accommodations within a prison setting is to ensure that individual needs are met, and positive outcomes are achieved. This appeared to be working for participants on C Block, however, did not eliminate all frustrations, anxieties, and stresses, highlighting that some adjustments are ‘needs basis’, therefore reacting to individual needs within that situation. Offering flexibility and adjustments to behaviours policies works well for the participants within this study as well as supporting a social model perspective but whilst one individual receives such adjustments, it can disrupt the routine of another, resulting in them becoming distressed and frustrated. Providing adjustments and considering the needs of all individuals who reside on the wing can be challenging to balance and manage.

The living conditions within prisons are often thought to be dull, dirty, and dilapidated, with many prisons still residing in buildings constructed in the Victorian era (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2017). This can sometimes result in some fixtures, fittings and the physical environment often outdated and not fit for purpose (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2017), which can sometimes have an impact on the ability to make adjustments. Residing on C Block appeared to work for all participants in different ways, with all reporting some positives to the wing. Yet, the need to segregate individuals with autism to provide effective support does not adopt a social model perspective and although this thesis can recognise the benefits C Block has made for all participants, it still questions why many of the adjustments cannot be implemented as standard practice across all aspects of the prison.

One of the biggest barriers to ensuring appropriate adjustments are implemented is the apparent lack of disabled people’s voices. Guffey (2023) advocated for disabled people to be present in decision making,

especially when decisions directly affect their lives. She challenged a ’top-down’ approach, which identified professionals as ’knowledgeable’ concluding that a more personalised approach is required. In her book, Guffey (2023) showcased case studies and interviews from disabled people, professionals and researchers, concluding that a more diverse approach, which is inclusive, to the design of environments and policies can promote positive outcomes for disabled people. Within this study, it appears as though individuals with autism have not been consulted on how their needs were attempted to be met within a prison environment. Furthermore, it was highlighted in Chapter Four, how the prison standards were also designed without disabled people's involvement. This does not support an inclusive approach, but instead can reinforce a hierarchical system, with disabled people voices not being heard.

# 8. Chapter Eight: COVID-19 and the effects on individuals with autism in prison

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the viewpoint of individuals with autism serving a sentence in a UK prison, who were continuing to implement the NAS' Prison Standards. Looking directly at the preventative measures, as well as the support offered throughout and after restrictions had eased, this chapter will examine the effects these had on the holistic development of individuals with autism. The second visit to Prison AA was conducted during the final stages of the pandemic, in September 2021. At the time of interviews, the UK had already experienced a lengthy lockdown and were carefully and slowly planning the relaxing of restrictions. This chapter will explore the impacts the restrictions imposed upon prisons, in relation to Prison AA's ability to continue to implement the NAS' Prison Standards, from the viewpoints of individuals with autism.

Coronavirus, often referred to as COVID-19, is a highly infectious respiratory disease (WHO, 2024), which if caught, could result in devastating and potentially life-threatening consequences. It was declared a pandemic in March 2020, due to the transmission rates worldwide. As with the rest of the UK, prisons were also subjected to strict restrictions and lockdowns, sometimes referred to as 'the quarantine regime'. In the case of COVID-19, individuals *with* and *without* the disease were subjected to quarantine, due to the governments primary goal to reduce the spread of the virus (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). For individuals in prison, who are reliant on others to have their basic needs met, live closely together in restricted spaces, with minimal ventilation, the WHO (2021) stressed the requirement for preventative measures to be implemented quickly to slow down the transmission rates. For those in prison, whose freedoms were already limited, the introduction of 22-hour lockdowns, minimal interactions amongst all individuals and significant disruption to daily routines, it left many individuals with autism struggling significantly (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). The introduction of such restrictions may have come at the cost of a significant decline in prisoner mental and physical health (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). This chapter will examine this further.

Furthermore, COVID-19 stopped many services, resources, educational and rehabilitation opportunities prisons offer, resulting in many individuals being released having not received what the government perceive to be the 'necessary tools' to be successful within the community (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b). For those who experienced COVID-19 in prison, it has been suggested that the restrictive

regimes intensified negative mental well-being (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b; Prison Reform Trust, 2021). An increase in boredom, loneliness and isolation caused many individuals to become extremely frustrated, anxious, and depressed (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021) with mental health concerns at an all-time high. For individuals with autism, who can often rely on the familiarity of rules and routines, coping with unpredicted change alongside feelings of boredom and isolation, may have intensified their risk of suffering from mental health issues (Davidson et al, 2020).

Suhomlinova et al (2021:280) highlights the three approaches prisons introduced as a response to the pandemic.

- Front end: reducing the risk of the virus entering the prison by stopping personal visits;
- In prison: limiting the risk of the virus spreading amongst staff and prisoners by suspending educational and rehabilitation courses, closing leisure activities such as gyms and libraries as well as increased lockdown for prisoners;
- Back end: reducing the risk of the virus spreading amongst elderly prisoners and those with health conditions by allowing, within reason, early release of such individuals.

'Front end' and 'in prison' will be explored further throughout this chapter as individuals with autism were interviewed during their sentence, with no participant indicating that they were being considered for an early release.

## 8.2 A 'Front end' approach – communication with friends and family within the community

In March 2020, family visits were suspended in a bid to reduce the spread of COVID-19 within prisons. Although the safety of individuals in prison as well as staff, was the core purpose of such drastic and quickly implemented regimes, HMPPS (2020) did recognise the importance of maintaining family contact. As this could not be face-to-face, alternative methods of communication was to be explored, including video calling. This was something Daniel referred to during his interview. Daniel stated that due to his difficulties in completing visitation forms correctly, he had not had contact with his brother for a significant period of time, including prior to COVID. With new restrictions preventing face-to-face visits, it appeared to leave Daniel upset. When questioned about contact with his brother Daniel states:

| | |
|---|---|
| Daniel | He's been wanting to come and see me since I started in this prison, but I can't have visitors the whole time because of my behaviour and then because of that shit form thing [filling visitation forms in incorrectly] and now COVID |

| | |
|---|---|
| | restrictions. He hasn't asked to come see me since I got his birthday wrong. Might be pissed off with me. |
| Interviewer | Are you allowed to speak to him on the phone or anything like that? |
| Daniel | Yes, can do video calling but I don't do it, I don't like it. Definitely not the same! Need to just speak to him to his face. |

During his interview, Jonathan echoed Daniel, reporting that "he tried the video calling but didn't like it … just wasn't the same. I don't think he liked the fact he could see himself on the screen as well. The connection wasn't great the whole way through too." The introduction of video calling may appear to be a positive alternative, especially whilst face-to-face visits were suspended, as it allowed for visual contact with family and friends within the community, whilst reducing the physical aspect. Although their research was based on medical appointments during COVID for individuals with autism, Davidson's et al (2020) study examined the views of such people in relation to introducing video calls instead of face-to-face conversations. Davidson et al (2020) report that 71% of individuals with autism would agree to an appointment via video calling, with 16% proclaiming it would be their preferred method of communication. Davidson et al (2020) concluded that based on their research, video calling may be a new positive addition to conducting appointments with individuals with autism. Nevertheless, it does appear that 84% of individuals with autism do not prefer video calls, suggesting that face-to-face appointments are still important, but video calling is an alternative they may engage with during a time when this is not possible. For individuals such as Daniel, video calling did not appear to offer him the familiarity or comfortableness physical visitation brings. Consequently, he was left feeling lonely and having minimal contact with his brother, something which he appeared to crave. Additionally, as Jonathan commented, the internet connection was unreliable throughout, something which may create a further dislike to the provision (Edge et al, 2021).

Daniel was the only individual who reported trialling video calling, other participants referred to telephone calls to contact family and friends within the community during COVID. Although this is a familiar form of communication within prisons prior to COVID, it was reported that 'increased phone credit' would be issued at the expense of prisons during COVID (HMPPS, 2020). This was not reported by any participants, including staff, within this study. George appeared frustrated when he spoke about contact with his family, raising his voice and moving more frequently in his seat, he stated:

> “you couldn’t have visitors an all that, but you could speak to your family on the phone, but it was like once a month or something because they said they had to keep cleaning the phone in between which was taking longer. Pretty pointless in the end when you waited all that time to be told it's now time to go back to your cell.”

Lockwood (2021) reported similar findings. In her research, Lockwood (2021) discovered the vast range of experiences regarding contact with the community, from the viewpoint of mothers who had children who were serving a sentence during COVID-19. Lockwood (2021) highlights how some mothers reported that telephone calls became the primary, and often only, form of communication. As Lockwood’s (2021) participants were obtained via organisations within the community, a vast number of prisons would have been discussed, but not identified, suggesting that the mothers experience was heavily based on the prison their adult child attended, and the provisions they put in place. The cleaning regime, what George draws attention to, was the reason one mother in Lockwood’s (2021) study reported significantly halted their communication. Nevertheless, Lockwood (2021) did report how many mothers reported of daily telephone calls from their adult children. Within this study, Fred’s experiences differed from George, as he reports of regular contact with his mum and when asked whether this changed during COVID, he responded, “No, I could still speak to her, more than what I wanted to, actually.” Fred laughed when making this comment, suggesting he was not being serious. He is not forced to make regular telephone calls to his mother, suggesting that he does so because he enjoys the contact.

Other ways to stay in contact with friends and family within the community was to write letters. Although this is another form of communication within prisons, during COVID it was reported that additional materials were provided to ensure that this was achievable for all, as well as increasing individual’s allowance in sending letters (HMPPS, 2020). As discussed in chapter Five, many participants in this study struggled with their literacy skills, therefore additional writing materials may not have been beneficial, but instead may cause further distress. This was evident for Daniel who highlighted his frustrations when attempting to write a letter during COVID, “tried didn’t I, but these lot [staff] couldn’t help me, and I couldn’t do it on my own. Spelt everything wrong and wasn’t sending that piece of shit out, embarrassing that.” Such experiences were also reflected in HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021a) report, who also refer to one individual whose limited time out of his cell was spent queuing to speak to staff to request literacy support, rather than exercising or showering. This highlights the disadvantage such individuals were faced with, and the lack of appropriate and safe alternatives provided.

## 8.3 An 'In prison' approach to reducing the spread of COVID-19 in prison

### 8.3.1 Social interaction

For individuals in prison, lockdowns reduced interactions with others within the prison community. For individuals with autism, who reportedly find social interactions challenging (NAS, 2022; Vinter et al, 2020) the reduction of such interactions could be perceived as a relief. Edward discussed how he worked in servery during COVID, with two other individuals with autism, delivering hot meals to those residing in their cells. When asked about such interactions, he states, "everyone else was banged up and there was just three of us doing it … just helping the staff out basically. Was nice because we just talked to them, didn't have to interact with half of these fucking idiots in here." Interacting with a small number of people, in a less crowded environment, may relieve some of the additional pressures prison can present to individuals with autism, especially Edward who appeared to struggle to find similar interests with other individuals on C Block, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Daniel spoke about his interactions during Covid in relation to sharing a cell. All individuals on C Block, for a variety of reasons, do not share a cell, which during COVID, significantly reduced the social interaction received. Although Daniel reports that sometimes it was lonely and boring, he would still prefer to occupy a single cell. He states,

"if it was just a choice of being in there on my own … then I'd choose that over having somebody to have a laugh with. More benefits to being on my own I'd say, means I don't have to speak to people I don't want to".

Although the pressure of social interaction had decreased, reports of loneliness and boredom significantly rose. In their research, Suhomlinova et al (2021) discovered many participants who reported an increased feeling of loneliness, then resulted in further negative outcomes such as self-harm and mental health issues. These are not isolated incidents, with many reports and research highlighting the direct link between loneliness and poor mental health during COVID (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2020; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020; Prison Reform Trust, 2020).

### 8.3.2 Daily routine

The need to isolate to reduce the spread of the virus had significant effects on the daily routines of the prison system. Individuals would spend around 22 hours per day locked in their cell, with minimal interaction, stimulation, or structure (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b). This caused great frustration, boredom, and anxiety. For individuals with autism, having a structured routine creates a sense of

calmness and predictability (Vinter et al, 2020), something which was challenging to control during COVID. When questioned about this, Daniel expressed his frustrations with the change in his routine, stating “yes, my routine changed … didn’t like it!” When questioned further about why he didn’t like it, Daniel explained, “nothing happened when it was supposed to, so didn’t have a clue what to expect, just sat bored in my cell”. In their study, Davidson et al (2020) highlighted how routines and predictability were important, and during the pandemic when these were restricted and changed significantly, some individuals with autism began making new routines as a coping mechanism. It is important to recognise that although Davidson’s et al (2020) study was based on individuals with autism, their participants did not have the added restrictions the prison system enforces. Therefore, establishing new routines, which may involve watching TV, playing games, or planning meals, are all unavailable for individuals in prison, who are confined to their cell for 22 hours a day. This was something Harry discussed, informing me that he was,

> “just sat on my arse all day … couldn’t go to the gym or nothing … just go outside once a day but it wasn’t for very long and nothing to do but walk in circles … but at least I was out of my cell … did affect me up here though [uses his index finger to tap on his temple]”.

Fred reports similar frustrations, stating that he was only permitted to “half an hour exercise and a ten-minute shower. No structure at all … just wandering around the yard.” Although adjustments are something prisons are required to implement, ensuring that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage, COVID made this extremely challenging. With little guidance, prisons were required to protect the safety of all individuals, establish a new and safe routine which allowed basic human needs to be met, as well as ensuring that disabled people were not further disadvantaged for reasons relating to their disability. It is evident that within this study, Prison AA found this extremely difficult with participants expressing their frustrations and anxieties around the unpredictability, immediate changes to routine and minimal stimulation.

### 8.3.3 Facilities and services

The quick change in routine meant that nearly all services within prisons were halted (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021). This included all purposeful activities, leisure activities as well as significant restrictions on contact with probation, POMS, and legal representatives. Edward referred to his probation review, highlighting his frustrations with the delay due to COVID and the minimal support offered to enable him to be successful upon release. He states,

"If I get parole, then nothing is even in place, like where will I live, who do I report to, jobs and all that, nothing is sorted … I keep asking and all I get is 'it's because of COVID' everything is just delayed."

Edward's frustrations appear to be with the uncertainty around his release and the minimal support he has had to plan for this. This was something echoed by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2021) and Prison Reform Trust (2021), who both highlighted the significant number of individuals in prison whose parole hearings were affected by COVID, but also the minimal support offered from probation workers, which resulted in many individuals being released from prison, but without the most appropriate support and provision in place. Through conversations with Edward, it is apparent that he does not feel confident being released back into the community without support and provisions in place, which he feels comfortable enough to access and feels that are appropriate for his needs.

Daniel spoke very openly about the services and facilities which were not available during COVID. During his interview, Daniel reported how he enjoyed spending time in the sensory room, but the pandemic halted this provision, and it disappointed him. He also discussed his love for reading books and would often spend time in the library prior to COVID, but due to restrictions this provision was also withdrawn. He concluded that COVID "was shit, wasn't it?" Daniel appeared most disappointment with the closure of the library and his restrictions in reading books. He states, "during COVID they stopped giving out books because of all the spreading and stuff … not allowed down there to the library. COVID stopped it all. Shit, isn't it?" House of Commons and Education Committee (2022a) recognised the importance of libraries and the role they play in promoting the holistic development of individuals in prison, calling for more books to be readily available. Although it is recognised the additional measures prisons would have to implement to minimise the risk of the virus transmitting via a book exchange, this provision may have been helpful, useful, and stimulating for numerous individuals in prison, including Daniel.

### 8.3.4 Educational and rehabilitation opportunities

Education and rehabilitation services halted, something which many found challenging to cope with (HM Chief Inspector of Prison for England and Wales, 2021). George reports, "nobody was allowed on courses or anything because of COVID. Nobody cared if you were rehabilitated or anything, just didn't want to catch COVID did they?" Although George did state that he had not signed up for any courses prior to COVID, this option was now unavailable to him, creating a delay in him obtaining any qualification, developing his skills, or finding a job in prison, should he feel ready to do so. Suhomlinova's et al (2021) study mirrored George's frustrations, also highlighting the significant reduction in staff to support any form of education, with their participants stating they had not received any contact with

their learning co-ordinator halting any educational progression. Understandably, the priority was to keep everybody safe from contracting COVID, with this then producing unintended consequences.

After the initial concern of protecting all individuals within prison from COVID by introducing 22-hour lockdowns, guidance published by the MOJ (2020) made plans to provide in-cell work packs to encourage individuals to continue with their education. These packs were designed to address boredom, frustration and anxiety and included mindfulness and therapeutic activities (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021). No participants within this study discussed any in cell distraction packs, or any learning materials provided to them during COVID. This would suggest that the government's aim to introduce these was unsuccessful. This is something Emma declared, informing me that the resources provided were not applicable, in fact, "they were rubbish, we would have whacked it out in an afternoon." It appears little consideration was given to providing appropriate in-cell packs, for individuals with autism, and consequently their needs were ignored, leaving many unable to access it. Additionally, the lack of adjustments to ensure accessibility did not go unnoticed by staff in Prison AA, who felt unable to do anything to overcome it. Emma stated how during COVID "everything turned back into paper and forms because they weren't allowed out of their cell to use the computers." Emma appears to recognise how unhelpful this was for individuals with autism, proclaiming that "not all the lads can read and write and need support with filling out forms." Although this barrier was identified, Emma and other members of staff on C Block were unable to provide positive examples of how these were overcome.

Edward also discusses his frustrations, expressing how his inability to work, continue with education [which he chose to stop during COVID due to an altercation] and prove to the parole boards that he has taken steps to rehabilitate, was further affected by virus. He claims, "if I don't work or do classes or anything, how am I meant to prove to them fuckers I've changed?" As discussed earlier, Edward had difficulty obtaining effective and efficient support, ready for release. This coupled with his sense of inability to 'prove' he has rehabilitated by his continued education, appeared to worry him, and may have a negative impact on his mental well-being.

### 8.3.5 Effects on mental health and well-being

Negative effects on mental health during COVID was evident for participants in this study. Fred, who expressed that prior to COVID he was "always on the go" and being forced to spend 22 hours a day, confined to his cell, was challenging. He continues, "I struggled … just being stuck in my cell the whole time. You're like stuck in your own thoughts and then you start to over think it and that's not good for

your mental health." Such issues are not isolated. Suhomlinova et al (2021) discovered that some of their participants felt depressed, isolated, and lethargic, with little drive to get up every morning. Limited resources and activities, as well as regular guidance from the government, created a culture of boredom, frustration and increased mental health concerns (Dhami et al, 2020; Lockwood, 2021; Suhomlinova et al, 2021).

Research has suggested that a lack of mental stimulation and physical activity can negatively affect an individual's mental well-being (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). Consequently, this increases the risk of individuals displaying perceived challenging behaviours (Prison Reform Trust, 2022; Stephenson et al, 2020; Talbot, 2007). Displaying positive behaviours and participating in courses, programmes, and education, all contribute towards an individual's chances of release, satisfying parole boards of their rehabilitation. As discussed earlier, the structure, support, and routine of C Block has helped Daniel in many ways, but the introduction of lockdowns due to COVID brought about significant changes to his routine and this appeared to frustrate him, "I got to do them [classes] to learn, haven't I? Prove I'm trying to be a good boy and keep my head down, but it all stopped because of COVID but [they] still expected me to be a good boy though." Daniel, nor did any members of staff, report of any perceived challenging behaviours from him during the COVID lockdown, he did appear to suggest that the prison still kept high expectations of his behaviour without providing him with stimulation, interaction, or 'freedom' from his cell. Consequently, he was left to navigate his boredom, frustrations, and anxieties, with minimal support or shared information, expecting to manage his emotions effectively. Although reports since COVID have highlighted a decrease in violence during the lockdown (The Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2022; HM Chief Inspector for England and Wales, 2021), something which is regarded as positive, they does not seem to be making suggestions on how to overcome the underlying cause for such behaviours in order to keep violence down after the lockdown (HM Chief Inspector for England and Wales, 2021).

An increase in anxiety in prisoners was evident during COVID (Dhami et al 2020; Edge et al, 2021; HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2021; Suhomlinova et al, 2021) especially that they are reliant on staff for information, whilst expecting to adhere to the quick and even more restrictive new regimes, with minimal explanations (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021b). This was evident for Harry, who informed me, "I have anxiety, but it got worse during COVID. Just didn't know what was going on or when it was going to end." Both Suhomlinova et al (2021) and Lockwood (2021) report an increase in anxiety and self-harm as a coping mechanism. Harry did not disclose any incidents of self-harm, nor did

any members of staff, however, it is concerning that little attention is given to address and overcome issues which caused anxiety during COVID and may still continue to cause anxiety (Prison Reform Trust, 2020).

### 8.3.6 Reduction of staff

The reduction in staff within prisons did not completely stop the spread of the virus, with many still finding themselves contracting it, or being in contact with somebody who had tested positive. National guidance of isolation and quarantine had to be followed, consequently, leaving an already understaffed prison system with even fewer staff to offer support (Wilburn et al, 2021). Although a reduction in violence was reported during COVID (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2022; HM Chief Inspector for England and Wales, 2021) suggesting that individuals in prison may have been 'easier' to manage, lockdowns just presented a different set of challenges. Fred reported his frustrations with the reduction of staff during COVID, stating that "out of anyone it will affect us more … with our additional needs … it annoys me because it's not our problem when staff don't turn up … but then they take some of our staff so we can't do things." The reduction in staff did significantly affect the level of support provided, however, Jonathan proclaimed that he would often "just go and have a chat with the prisoners through their door as it was probably the only interaction, they got that day." It could be suggested that such interactions were kept at a minimal, especially if Jonathan had several individuals on C Block to check-in on and converse with. Additionally, with the added pressure of skeleton staff, with some staff being allocated elsewhere to accommodate other wings, the ability to have meaningful conversations with all individuals on C Block would have been impossible for one person to accomplish in one day.

## 8.4 Support provided during COVID-19

This section will explore the support provided to Prison AA and individuals with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 8.4.1 Guidance from the NAS and continued implementation of the Prison Standards

During COVID, Prison AA were still working alongside the NAS to gain 'Advanced Accreditation Status'. As detailed in Chapter One, whilst a prison is working towards accreditation status, support and guidance is offered from the NAS, to assist them in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. During a group interview, when questioned about the support they received from the NAS during COVID, Jonathan stated, "they didn't help us at all, we were clueless, but I suppose they probably were too." The effects of COVID had tremendous consequences for individuals with autism, and although it was unprecedented times, leading professionals who pride themselves in offering invaluable

support, guidance and advice for families and young people with autism, appeared to struggle to support the continuation of their accreditation programme, or offer strategies for staff to implement, to relieve some of the anxieties and stress caused. Prior to the second lockdown in September 2020, the NAS (2020) published a report, documenting the effects the virus had on individuals with autism and their families. They discuss how the restrictions imposed left many feelings 'stranded' and abandoned, as many services and support was withdrawn, leaving individuals with autism and their families confused, anxious and frustrated. Recommendations were made, calling for more funding, extended support from services as well as greater awareness and consideration for individuals with autism and their families (NAS, 2020). Although these recommendations may have enabled Prison AA to support individuals with autism, it appears as though Jonathan would have appreciated more personalised support and guidance throughout COVID, given the prison were implementing the NAS autism accreditation programme.

### 8.4.2 Support from the Government and Ministry of Justice

As with the rest of the UK, the desire to reduce the spread of the virus in prisons was paramount, with measures implemented quickly to reduce interaction. The MOJ, NHS England, HMPPS and Public Health England worked collaboratively to implement measures in the hope to save lives (O'Moore, 2020). They worked with prisons to plan risk assessments, manage staffing levels, and implement new regimes which ensured basic needs were met (HMPPS, 2020). Similar prevention techniques applied in the community, were also implemented in prisons and places of detention, such as the use of face coverings, social distancing and lockdowns (HMPPS, 2020; MOJ & UK Health Security Agency, 2020), however, Emma and Jonathan felt a lot of the guidance published was ambiguous and unclear and did not consider the effects on individuals with autism. Emma states, "we didn't receive any support from anybody, had to wing it ourselves, with guidance that wasn't helpful at all, not for our lads." Jonathan echoed this, further explaining that he felt the needs of individuals with autism were not considered when such guidance was issued, "I can't wear a mask when I'm escorting these lads to work, they would freak out … some also don't understand personal space either and although we had to keep reminding them, it's hard for them to understand." It appears as though the guidance and policies published were solely designed with the aim to protect lives, and although this is priority, strategies to ensuring this is successful were not always beneficial or achievable for individuals with autism.

Additionally, guidance published by the MOJ and UK Health Security Agency (2020) discussed the importance of physical changes to prisons to reduce the risk of the virus spreading. They stated how

regular testing, social distancing in the form of 22-hour lock downs, regular cleaning of hands, spaces, and equipment, as well as improved ventilation could all help the prison run safely (MOJ and UK Health Security Agency, 2020). Within this study, Edward discussed how he felt his cell was "not fit for purpose" especially during COVID due to the lack of fresh air available. He informs me, "my window has been boarded up for months, as some fucking idiot thought it was a good idea to throw chicken curry across it, knowing I'm a vegan, so it got smashed [by Edward] and never replaced."

### 8.4.3 Support from prison staff and peer mentors

Daily support throughout COVID was reportedly provided by staff, albeit a reduced number, who became many 'roles' for individuals with autism. As individuals in prison, including those with autism, experienced reduced visits from family, friends, healthcare professionals and legal representatives, limited outdoor time, as well as inaccessible paper-based writing materials (discussed within this chapter), they relied heavily on wing staff to provide everything. As discussed previously in this chapter, Jonathan prided himself in taking the time to speak to such individuals during lockdown, however, he also informed me how he felt he played many roles, "we are like social workers, fathers, friends, wing staff, counsellors, the list goes on". Individuals in prison also relied heavily on staff to inform them of the current situation, recent changes in guidance and new restrictions being imposed or lifted. For individuals with autism, staff are also required, by law, to ensure that this information is delivered in an accessible format, which may be challenging if staff are also confused and unclear on guidance, as previously highlighted in this chapter. Additionally, as previously highlighted "no fucking staff was there" [Fred] therefore a reduction in staff can have consequences on how readily information is shared. This was evident in Suhomlinova et al (2021) study, where they reported that some individuals did not know the purpose of being locked away all day, especially given they are unable to socialise with anybody else. Suhomlinova et al (2021) discovered that this caused intense frustrations, which were then re-directed towards staff, resulting in a decline in staff-prisoner relationships. As discussed in Chapter Five, only Edward discussed an altercation with a key member of staff during COVID, which could suggest the strategies and measures implemented by staff were somewhat beneficial for individuals with autism on C Block. Additionally, peer worker schemes were also significantly withdrawn, again limiting interactions with others. Edward had discussed his role as a mentor during his interview, but informed me this halted during COVID, as he had other responsibilities instead. Yet, Edward appeared to identify his role more as supporting staff, rather than other individuals with autism, and he fails to notice the benefits and positive effects this may have. In their annual report, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2021:14) concluded that "*the best prisons* [added emphasis] had created an environment in

which positive, meaningful conversations take place that increase trust and help prisoners to make progress." Emphasis was placed on 'the best prisons' as this would indicate that those who are unable to do so, would not be considered as 'good prisons. Nevertheless, Prison AA, with reported minimal guidance, appeared to put appropriate provisions in place to try and support individuals with autism as best as they could.

## 8.5 Returning to 'the new normal' – the easing of COVID-19 restrictions

The transitional period from lockdown was challenging for prisons to navigate, and in some cases were reported to be slower at reducing the restrictions compared to the community (Schliehe et al, 2022). However, in this study, Jonathan reported that "we were the first wing they trailed it with [easing restrictions] because they noticed the lads needed it more." In this instance, Prison AA recognised the significant impact being in lockdown created for individuals with autism and when possible, began implementing the easing of restrictions. Jonathan continues by stating that individuals were "allowed out of their cell for longer and we started to introduce new routines, something the lads missed." Although new routines may have been short lived, as another lockdown was introduced shortly after the second visit was conducted, it had not gone unnoticed by staff that the restrictions in place were having a significant effect on individuals with autism. One could make presumptions that more adaptations may have been implemented to tackle some of the barriers faced during the first lockdown, however, this is unknown.

During the group interview, Emma also discussed the easing of restrictions on C Block, explaining that "it's tricky to navigate but these lads can't be locked in their cells all day again, they will become worse than what they were when they arrived in prison" with Mike expressing "it's not rehabilitation, its keeping caged animals alive." The direct comparison to caged animals was disturbing and was a realisation that individuals in prison were treated significantly less favourably compared to individuals in the community during COVID. Prisons already enforce restrictions as a form of punishment, therefore withdrawing little freedoms they had, with minimal consideration to the long-term adverse effects this may have, highlighted their status in society. Arguably, physical space, resources and limited staff had a direct impact on the restrictions imposed on prisons, however, it appears as though little consideration was taken to implement adjustments to ensure individuals with autism were not further disadvantaged for any reasons relating to their disability. In their report, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021) also report of individuals in prison feeling like 'caged animals' however, no accountability was recorded, rather identification of the significant effects COVID has had on individuals' mental well-being.

The easing of restrictions was recognised by all participants as positive, with many reporting how they had recently been able to access leisure activities or go back to some form of education. Daniel reports how he was “able to go on the computer the other day, was buzzing, been ages!” With Fred also reporting how he “finally got back in the gym, need to work on these bad boys [pointing to his biceps].” Such reports indicate that some restrictions are beginning to lift, although cautiously, but already seem to be having a positive impact on individuals with autism. Yet, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021b) did report that in many prisons, the reintroduction of services was slow, which could ultimately have a negative impact on individuals with autism, if they were kept in lockdown for longer than necessary. Nevertheless, Prison AA appeared to act quickly and plan for a safe easing of restrictions in order to produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

## 8.6 Positive outcomes resulting from COVID-19 for individuals with autism

Many positive outcomes, whether intended or not, were established because of COVID-19. This includes recognition of the importance of staff-prisoner relationships, accessible information, and communication, as well as consistent routines. As discussed within this chapter, Jonathan’s felt his relationships with “the lads improved” because he had more time to dedicate to ‘small talk’. This did not go unnoticed by participants in this study, with Harry stating “they [staff] were good during COVID, came and talked to me whilst I was in my cell, gave me something to do. I like them.” The Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2022) concluded that relationships between staff and individuals in prison deteriorated through COVID, with many restrictions due to staff shortage. This did not appear to be the case within this research, as each participant felt comfortable enough speaking to at least one member of staff.

I It has been reported that staff across other prisons feel COVID-19 has, in some way, helped achieve the government's target of reducing the usage of illegal substances (Schliehe et al, 2022). This is due to limited interactions impacting the flow and distribution of drugs. Fred reported this, “I can’t get hold of any spice. Not going off the wing am I and not seeing many people.” Although it could be argued that being unable to obtain drugs was positive and beneficial to Fred’s long-term health, if he is not ready to completely address such addictions and overcome them, it could increase the risk of overdose (Suhomlinova et al, 2022), especially when restrictions eased and he was able to obtain it.

Although staff recognised, prior to COVID, the importance of regular and consistent routines for individuals with autism, COVID, solidified the need to ensure such routines are adhered by as much as possible. In a group interview, Jonathan stated, “these lads need routine, and it needs to be the same everyday if they are to improve, COVID-19 kind of taught us that more so, in a weird way.” Generally,

routines and structure are something prisons thrive on, and individuals with autism may find comfort in this (Vinter and Dillon, 2023) the sudden change and unpredictability in the routine that COVID caused, resulted in, Jonathan described as, “significant mental health issues that we are going to be battling for years to come.” To continue to support the long-term effects of COVID, as well as help produce positive outcomes for individuals with autism in prison, C Block believe it all “starts with good routines that are stuck to” [Jonathan].

Accessible communication and information was challenging during COVID, due to the ever-changing rules and restrictions imposed. For individuals with autism, change in their routine would have presented difficulties, however, Emma states that “we tried to let them know what was happening, when we could.” The recognition that such individuals need to have processing time regarding changes to their routine is evident, with Emma acknowledging that they ‘need to know’ what is happening so they can process it. Informing individuals with autism of all changes would have been challenging, with Emma stating she informs them when “she could”, indicating that this is not on every occasion. Nevertheless, sharing information whenever possible appeared to work for individuals on C Block, as all reported positive relationships with staff, indicating that they did not blame them for not sharing information, or for the restrictions imposed.

## 8.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the effects COVID-19 had on prison life for individuals with autism. Lockdown presented individuals in prison with numerous challenges, which they were forced to adhere to, often with little prior knowledge or explanation. The long-term effects are potentially more devastating than currently known, with individuals requiring more support than ever. Research exploring such effects, involving individuals with autism in prison is minimal and consequently, leaves prisons unaware of to what extent COVID impacted such people. Without such knowledge, it could be argued that appropriate learning and planning cannot be made to ensure similar situations which may occur in the future are better controlled and managed.

Research suggests that individuals with autism are at greater risk of developing poor mental health (Camm-Crosbie, 2019) mainly due to the lack of, and inaccessible, support available. COVID significantly reduced and in some cases, withdrew the support available for individuals with autism in prison, therefore a decline in mental health should not come as a surprise. A decline in mental well-being was discussed within this chapter, with participants pinpointing this to the lack of stimulation, interaction, and imposed changes to their routine. Quick and immediate changes were implemented to prevent the

spread of the virus, often with minimal communication, creating confusion and frustration. These changes disrupted familiar routines, something which individuals with autism may find challenging to process and deal with (Vinter and Dillon, 2023). Instead of positive alternatives, boredom and loneliness were consequences of support and service withdrawal.

In-class education paused for the entire country, not just those in prison, however adhering to their legal duties, school, and educational providers within the community endeavoured to continue to support those considered to be 'most vulnerable'. This came in the form of online learning, paper-based work as well as key worker school learning. Society's most 'vulnerable' students were offered learning within the classroom, with qualified teachers delivering an alternative curriculum, at a safe distance (Roberts and Danechi, 2022). Such adjustments appeared to not be available to adult learners, including those in prison who were considered as 'vulnerable'. Instead, a 'one size fits all' approach was taken. This often, as evident within this study, did not cater for the needs of individuals with autism, who consequently, were left unsupported and without stimulation. Many participants within this study reported how this negatively affected their holistic development, as well as their progress both within prison and upon release back into the community. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) did recognise that a considerable number of individuals were being released, without the necessary skills or education to be considered 'successfully rehabilitated' therefore increasing the risk of re-offending. Plans on how to support individuals with autism to be successful upon release after COVID is absent from their report, leaving many 'vulnerable' and at risk of re-offending. For individuals with autism, the inability to successfully plan for their release and be prepared for life within the community is something which caused increased anxiety and frustration and can create additional barriers upon release.

Although social interaction may present challenges for individuals with autism, it does not always remove the desire to form meaningful relationships with others and socialise (Crompton et al, 2020). This was evident for individuals in this study, who found themselves missing social interaction during COVID. The main form of interaction came from familiar staff, who would take the time to communicate with individuals, however, Fred did highlight the reduction of staff during COVID, frustrated that C Block officers were deployed onto other wings. Despite this challenge, it appears that positive relationships between staff and individuals with autism were formed, demonstrating the dedication, compassion, awareness and understanding of the staff on C Block. This worked for all participants within this study, who reported being able to speak to at least one member of staff on C Block.

Despite the minimal guidance and advice from the NAS and the government reported from participants, during COVID, it was evident that staff worked hard to ensure individuals with autism were safe but not put at a substantial disadvantage compared to their peers. Although barriers were evident, and individuals with autism felt negatively affected by the implementations brought about by COVID, it could be suggested that staff on C Block continued to follow the NAS prison standards and promote positive outcomes for individuals with autism. As discussed in Chapter Four, the Standards promote a trained staff community, that can cater to the individual needs of individuals with autism, by making appropriate adjustments to enable positive outcomes. Although this was significantly affected by COVID, it was evident that the knowledge and understanding staff had already obtained enabled them to recognise how some implementations of COVID could 'double disadvantage' individuals with autism such as lack of stimulation, in-cell education packs and minimal interaction, and try to take appropriate steps to ease such barriers.

# 9. Chapter Nine: Conclusion

## 9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore what works for whom, under what circumstances and why, through the lived experiences of individuals with autism, who were serving a sentence within a UK prison, that was working towards Autism Accreditation. It began by examining in what ways the NAS Autism Accreditation prison standards was expecting to bring about positive outcomes for individuals with autism, discovering the views and opinions of two programme architects. The findings and conclusions from these interviews, helped shape the following phase, which involved direct conversations with individuals with autism. This allowed for a greater in-depth and personal account of what worked for whom, under what circumstances and why. Significant factors which were not planned for, such as COVID-19, directly affected the implementation of the Prison Standards and the intended outcomes for individuals with autism. This research had the opportunity to explore these for individuals with autism.

This chapter will begin by examining the key findings emerging from the policy review and interviews with two key people from the NAS, as it was such findings which helped shape the programme theories, which were then tested within Phase Two of this thesis. These include reasonable adjustments and adaptations which occur mainly on C Block, such as a recognition of a differentiated educational system, increased staff training and development and flexibility in relation to the rules and regimes. Education is also explored in greater detail as the government, MOJ and the NAS appears to highlight this as a significant contributing factor in reducing re-offending. Rules and routines are significant for individuals with autism and were discussed within the prison standards. The impact these had of the daily lives of individuals with autism were also explored further. Additional theories around social communication and interaction are also examined, based on previous policy and literature reviews as well as personal and professional experience highlighting it as instrumental in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Finally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are also examined, a context in which could not be planned for but directly affected the outcomes for individuals with autism and this thesis.

## 9.2 Key Findings from the Programme Architects and policy reviews

Interviews with the Programme Architects, alongside reviews of policies, research, and guidelines as well as the Prison Standards themselves, all helped shape Phase One of this thesis. Conclusions from this

phase was instrumental in creating programme theories, which were then 'tested' within Phase Two, during interviews with individuals with autism. Some of these findings were expected, based on document reviews, however, other theories were established due to personal experience and knowledge.

### 9.2.1 Education and development

Education in prison is intended to support a successful rehabilitation. It is offered in all prisons across the UK, however, it is not always accessible or inclusive, but instead more of a 'one size fits all' approach. Education intends to provide prisoners with the necessary knowledge and skills required to obtain a job upon release (MOJ, 2021). This in turn, the government state, will reduce re-offending (Coates, 2016; MOJ, 2021). This was something supported by the NAS, with Annie stating, "we want people to be successfully rehabilitated and not come back to prison." However, what appears to be absent is the drive, encouragement, and available opportunities for individuals, especially those with autism, to participate in educational activities which can then enhance their chances of 'rehabilitation'. Without the opportunity or the personal motivation, education may not achieve the desired benefits (House of Commons and Education Committee, 2022a). Education, learning, and development was highlighted as a significant factor in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism, with one third of the prison standards focusing primarily on this.

Throughout interviews with the NAS, education was a common theme, with both participants promoting an inclusive education system that caters for individual needs. What appears to be absent was the role education can play in promoting a positive mental well-being as well as learning and development of skills (Stephenson et al, 2020), rather than just focusing on obtaining qualifications. This thesis is of the belief that education offers more than potential job opportunities upon release and instead feels that more focus and attention should be given to increasing mental stimulation, development of skills, increased self-esteem, increased social interaction as well as enjoyment. All of which could also contribute towards a successful rehabilitation back into the community, one which does not always involve obtaining employment.

The NAS asserts that the continuous education, development, and training of staff was a vital component in establishing positive outcomes for individuals with autism (NAS Prison standards, and interviews with programme architects). Both Annie and Barney stated that all staff, not just those assigned to C Block, should have autism specific training, enabling them to become more aware and have a greater understanding (See Chapter Four). However, too often, only staff whose specific job roles

require them to have additional training are considered (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021). This could then create a culture where support can only be obtained from a few members of staff, rather than all officers within the prison. The NAS called for greater opportunities for all staff to continue their professional development, making regular training 'the new norm' rather than 'good practice'. They argued that this does not always have to happen within a classroom but could be online, reflective or through peer discussions, but the purpose is to make it flexible, so more staff have time to access it. This may present challenges for some prisons, who are understaffed and may have great difficulties in successfully and safely running the prison with fewer staff present. Additionally, the effects on individuals with autism could be challenging, as fewer familiar staff may result in a change to the routine.

Annie and Barney also discussed how the induction stage plays a significant role in a prisoner's journey, as it is where pathways of support are identified. Prisons rely largely on disclosures from individuals upon entering prison, often leaving many without appropriate support due to their inability to share personal information with unfamiliar people (Locks and Talbot, 2007). Annie and Barney called for greater training and awareness for induction staff to help identify individuals who they believe may require additional support, enabling early intervention. As Annie and Barney state prisons are a "small village" therefore having everybody within the 'village' appropriately trained to understand how to best support individuals with autism, can only increase positive outcomes. The NAS Prison Standards also made a direct correlation between increased training and development and positive outcomes for individuals with autism, therefore this theory was explored further in Phase Two.

### 9.2.2 Adjustments, adaptations, and positive changes

Although the Prison Standards only refer to adjustment's three times throughout, it is heavily implied that without adaptations to the prison regime, behaviour policy, and services provided, positive outcomes for individuals may not be achieved. What was evident throughout the Standards and interviews with programme architects, was the need to initially identify potential barriers, introduce regular training, and only then can appropriate adjustments and adaptations be implemented. Adjustments and accommodations are required across every aspect of the prison environment and regime, therefore the adaptations implemented within Prison AA were explored further in Phase Two, to establish what works for whom, under what circumstances and why.

### 9.2.3 Relationships

Social interaction and forming bonds were something the Prison Standards did not explicitly highlight as a key factor in producing positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The standards did discuss the introduction of 'Autism Champions'; individuals who specialise in autism and are available to offer advice and guidance, appearing to create a culture of awareness amongst prison staff, rather than support individuals with autism directly. Although absent within the prison standards, peer mentoring was discussed with Annie, who gave an example of peer support from an individual with autism, suggesting how such support can be important. Positive relationships have previously been argued as fundamental in the success of the prison system (Liebling et al, 2010; Crewe, 2011). Without such relationships, alongside greater knowledge and awareness, positive outcomes for individuals with autism may not be readily achieved. Due to this, it was deemed imperative that relationships between individuals with autism, staff and other prisoners be explored further in Phase Two.

### 9.2.4 Communication and Interaction

With regular and up to date training for all prison staff, it could create conditions within which accommodations for individuals with autism are easier to implement, as there is a greater awareness and understanding. The Standards promote a person-centred approach to support, encouraging prisons to include and consult with individuals with autism about the care and support they receive. To do this successfully, Annie and Barney discussed how effective communication is vital, something which staff may need to adjust when interacting with an individual with autism, to reduce misunderstandings. They refer to 'effective communication' as staff 'listening to individuals with autism' as well as ensuring that information shared has been understood. Arguably, effective communication, not just to plan pathways of support, but in all interactions can increase positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Having an awareness of the importance of preparation for change, processing time as well as one step instructions using simple language all contribute towards reducing anxiety and stress levels.

Individuals with autism within this study all resided on C Block, alongside other individuals with a diagnosis of autism, or who were being explored for the condition. Introducing a designated 'autism specific' wing is not something the prison standards, nor the NAS advocate for, but instead they promote a whole prison approach, with all staff having the necessary skills and knowledge to support all individuals with autism. Due to the circumstances in which the participants within this study found themselves, it was deemed significant that communication and interaction be explored further in Phase Two, as many would be able to compare interactions between C Block staff and those who support on

other wings as well as the communication and interactions they have experienced with others with autism on the wing.

## 9.3 C Block – Special Vs Mainstream – What works for whom?

Although not advocated for within the prison standards, Prison AA made the decision to facilitate support for individuals with autism on a specialist wing. All participants within this study had experienced prison either at a different establishment or within another part of Prison AA, therefore were able to compare their support. This section will conclude what works for whom, in the context of C Block, examining whether the mechanisms implemented supported positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

### 9.3.1 Induction wing – arriving at Prison AA

The induction wing is the initial part of an individual's prison journey, therefore could be argued the most important in ensuring effective support is identified and implemented at the earliest stage possible (McCulloch, 2012). As the prison standards highlighted the induction stage as fundamental for individuals with autism, calling for development of staff who can offer appropriate support, this was discussed during participant interviews, to gain their experiences of the process. All participants discussed the induction wing; however, three participants discussed their time in detail, with each one having a different experience. Only 25% of participants received C Block as their initial pathway of support due to disclosing their autism to staff. This highlights how the identification process on the induction wing is not always successful, with more focuses needed on development of all staff across the prison. This could reduce the reliance on individuals having to disclose personal information, which is evident in this study, is not always successful. Myers (2004) has previously argued that information on diagnosis and additional needs may be challenging to obtain for prison staff, especially if communication difficulties are present and a lack of reliable and routine screening tool is absent. This approach appears to almost excuse staff's inability to recognise characteristics of autism, blaming a lack of resources to assist them in doing so.

### 9.3.2 Experiences of other wings within the prison

For 75% of participants in this study, their pathway of support initially did not involve C Block, and consequently, as discussed in this thesis, they report support was absent. Such individuals reported different experiences of support, compared to participants whose pathway originally involved a transfer to C Block, detailing how adjustments, staff and other prisoners were unable to recognise and understand their individual needs. This was evident for Adam who although did disclose his epilepsy

upon induction was still transferred to another wing. But as Jonathan states, he was not transferred here until he made an “off comment” about his autism. The significant number of participants within this study who did not receive early intervention does suggest that not only the induction process is not entirely successful at identifying individuals with autism, but staff on other wings are not appropriately trained and knowledgeable about autism, which could impact positive outcomes for such people.

This was echoed by Mike, who had recently transferred from another wing. He informed me that supporting on C Block was “eye opening” and the preconceived notions he had about individuals with autism drastically changed. He also highlighted how the support offered on C Block is “miles apart” from that on other wings within the mainstream part of the prison. This suggests that staff on other wings may feel ill-equipped to identify and support individuals with autism and more needs to be done to overcome this, especially if individuals with autism are to be fully included within all aspects of the mainstream prison or have better support if they reside on different wings. Additionally, it does raise concerns around the support individuals with autism receive to achieve positive outcomes, if they reside on other wings due to being unnoticed or unable to disclose their diagnosis, compared to those on C Block. A failure to offer mirrored support across the whole prison may result in a lack of positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

Nevertheless, participants did discuss positive aspects of accessing services on other wings across the prison. The use of the gym appeared to be the most positive facility utilised by participants, and although some did report some negative experiences in being able to access it on a regular basis, overall, it was positive. Having regular access to physical exercise appears to work best for many individuals with autism, even if this meant being supported by staff who were not aware and knowledgeable of autism and being surrounded by prisoners without a diagnosis. During her interview, Emma did recognise the adjustments needed to ensure this provision stayed positive, such as specific times of the day/week as well as prior notice if this would change. For this to happen, Emma would need to work closely with staff on other wings, ensuring communication is positive. This appeared to work, with many participants enjoying their designated gym time, often choosing this over health appointments, or education. It is positive that Emma can liaise effectively with staff on other wings in relation to C Block accessing the gym facilities, however, this was not the case for the education wing. During his interview, Jonathan states how he must escort individuals there, as well as stay with them. He also details how staff do not implement adaptations, which consequently results in negative educational experiences, as discussed earlier in this thesis in relation to Edward and Carl.

### 9.3.3 C Block

C Block is an isolated wing, operating under slightly different, and more flexible, rules and regimes, with a significant reduction in socialisation with prisoners who reside on other wings. Staff and individuals with autism continuously discussed the additional support individuals on C Block required, suggesting that this level support was absent on other wings, or barriers were preventing them from being implemented. Allely (2015) supports the idea of specialist wings, suggesting that they are required if additional support is to be provided. C Block was initially implemented due to Prison AA feeling the needs of individuals with autism could not be met within the mainstream part of the prison. Implementing a stand-alone wing, with specialist trained staff, who have increased awareness and understanding so they can provide adjustments and accommodations was the approach taken to achieve positive outcomes for individuals with autism.

There is no doubt that the adjustments, accommodations, and support provided on C Block worked for all participants. Although not every adjustment was beneficial for each individual, this was to be expected due to personal interests, background experience, and individual needs. The adaptations were autism specific, such as consideration of social communication therefore single cells being implemented, meals times and medication arrival at designated times every day, taking into consideration an increase in anxiety when expectations are not adhered to. These adaptations are some examples of what worked for all participants but could not be implemented across the mainstream part of the prison. This raises concerns regarding the positive outcomes of individuals with autism who may continue to experience prison on other wings but do not have such adaptations implemented and their needs considered.

The isolation of individual's C Block appeared to support the social communication of some participants as it resulted in fewer altercations. This was due to them being surrounded by others who had a shared knowledge and lived experience of the condition, as well as trained staff. Crompton et al (2020) has argued that individuals with autism feel a sense of calmness and surrounded by others who share the condition. Although this did appear to be true within this study, some participants did also share a desire to interact with others off the wing. As discussed in Chapter six, Edward discusses a utopia, a community where only individuals with autism would reside. Although his vision has a similar likening to C Block, just without the restrictions of prison, Edward only informed me of one positive peer relationship, and this was with an individual on another wing who did not share his diagnosis. This highlights that he can converse successfully with others and enjoys this, however, with the introduction of C Block, such interactions are limited. Edward currently finds himself socially isolated, due to an

incident between staff, discussed in detail in Chapter Six. This would appear to suggest that segregating individuals with autism does not always create positive bonds, but instead isolates them from positive interactions with others, who may in-turn gain a greater understanding and awareness of how to interact with such individuals effectively. The lack of socialisation between individuals with autism and their non-disabled peers, creates a culture of ignorance, an 'out of sight out of mind' mentality, where awareness and understanding is absent. This may create additional barriers for individuals with autism when they do interact with others off the wing, or when released into society

It could be argued that the isolation of C Block could create a bigger divide between individuals with autism and non-disabled people, as segregation for support appears to be the ideology. Those on other wings, whose understanding and awareness of autism is minimal, may perceive C Block as receiving 'special treatment', which within a prison environment can cause frustrations. During his interview, Barney did show signs of concern with regards to the adjustments being implemented, stating that "what we don't want to do is make it so good that autistic offenders want to stay in prison". This is such a powerful statement. Prison should not be any worse for reasons relating to an individual's autism, therefore the need to make adaptations and adjustments is vital. What Barney appears to suggest is that these adjustments are 'so good' that individuals with autism do not want to leave prison. If adjustments were 'so good' it would not support the 'punishment' model the MOJ and HMPPS advocate for when sentencing an individual to prison, therefore this thesis does not believe this is the case. What appears to be the most significant barrier is not that of adjustments in prison being 'so good' but that the support within the community upon release does not mirror this, failing at their duty of care. Staff within this study did discuss support from C Block to prepare for release, such as acting as an advocate, communicating with external agencies, and sharing invaluable information as well as supporting family connections, but without the appropriate provisions in place within the community, individuals with autism may be unsuccessful upon release. This does not directly relate to the adjustments implemented on C Block and whether they have been successful or 'too good', nor should it prevent the continuous implementation of such adjustments in the future.

The facilities and services offered on C Block appeared to work for several participants. This included the bespoke and individualised educational packages that participants discussed. Daniel was very vocal about his educational support, proudly informing me of his achievements. However, such support was only available to individuals whose academic levels were low. Participants such as Edward required a much higher level of education, only offered on the Education wing, but for reasons relating to his

autism, Edward's education was halted. This also appeared to be the case for Carl, whose academic abilities would indicate he required much higher level of academic support, but for reasons which the prison claim, relate to his perceived challenging behaviours, Carl was prevented from accessing this provision. Although C Block implemented adjustments to ensure Carl was still able to access some form of education, placing him in alternative classes, this did not overcome the barrier of exclusion, nor did it promote a person-centred approach to learning from Prison AA.

Finally, having trained staff supporting on the wing worked for all participants, with each one being able to identify a trusted staff member they could speak to. The Prison Standards heavily promote staff training and development, and this was echoed in interviews with the programme architects, with them suggesting this is the initial stage of being successful in promoting positive outcomes for individuals with autism. The development of staff not only appeared to work for individuals with autism, but staff as well, with Jonathan reporting that he felt more confidence when supporting such individuals. Having the confidence in one's own abilities supports them to make positive choices about the people they support. Recognising that autism specific training is highly beneficial for individuals with autism, as well as the staff participating, Prison AA could look to implementing this across the entire prison community, allowing more individuals with autism to be identified and support within the mainstream part of the prison.

## 9.4 The effects of COVID-19 on the implementation of the Prison standards and creating positive outcomes for individuals with autism

### 9.4.1 Confidence in continued implementation of the Prison Standards

During a group interview, all three staff expressed their disappointment in their inability to successfully support individuals with autism through COVID and provide them with stimulating activities which were suitable, including during their one-two hour release time. Jonathan states, "we were kind of just left to do things, run things how we thought best, no guidance". As staff on C Block knew individual needs, their ability to implement accommodations during COVID may have proven more successful compared to staff on other wings, as their knowledge and awareness of autism is greater. Yet, with minimal guidance from the NAS, MOJ and HMPPS on appropriate strategies and accommodations specific for individuals with autism, staff on C Block appeared to be left unclear on how to stay safe whilst promoting positive outcomes.

### 9.4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on individuals with autism in prison

The long-term effects of COVID-19 for individuals with autism, serving a prison sentence at the time, will be unknown for a while, however, the immediate effects were captured within this thesis, highlighting a confused, frustrated, and lonely population. COVID was a difficult time for the entire world, associated with significantly devastating effects, some of which are referred to within this thesis by individuals with autism, such as increased mental health issues, limited stimulation, and minimal interaction. The effects of COVID on the mental well-being of an individual with autism could have serious consequences on their holistic development, sending them into crisis (NAS, 2020) especially given the reduced support provided for mental health needs. This was highlighted by Fred, who argued that the lack of mental stimulation, and an increase in boredom resulted in having negative thoughts. For a population who, it has been suggested, is at greater risk of developing mental health needs (NAS, 2020; Spain, 2021) due to the limited appropriate support available to them, reducing this support further could have damaging effects. However, during a global pandemic, continuing to provide services which help reduce poor mental health was challenging, especially with staffing levels were at crisis. Furthermore, difficulties in communication may restrict individuals with autism expressing their mental health struggles, especially during a time where additional stresses are present, and familiar staff are absent.

A sense of loneliness was also reported during COVID-19 by individuals with autism as social interaction significant reduced and the time spent in their cell was alone. All participants within this study expressed their relief around occupying a single cell, however some did report that during COVID there were times where they felt lonely. The desire to seek meaningful relationships with others is still present for individuals with autism, despite the typically associated difficulties such as struggling to read social cues, interpret language or understand non-verbal cues to name a few (Crompton, et al 2020). During COVID, opportunities to do this were heavily restricted. Some may argue that for individuals with autism, the reduction in social interactions may be perceived as positive, as the stress and anxiety socialising bring, was reduced (Spain et al, 2021). However, data from this study displayed that participants sense of loneliness and boredom outweighed the difficulties they may experience socialising.

The purpose of prison education, as identified by the MOJ and HMPPS, is to increase an individual's changes of employment upon release, by providing prisoners with the necessary skills to undertake work. COVID-19 changed the context of this, with education being provided as a way of passing the time and providing stimulation (HMPPS, 2020). This came in the form of in-cell work packs. Little consideration was given to towards those who may find such packs challenging, especially without

additional support. For individuals in this study, such packs were not distributed, with Emma informing me that they "were rubbish". Emma's opinion of such packs was not isolated, with research suggesting other prisons, albeit not referring to individuals with autism, did not positively receive them (Edge et al, 2021)

Any change in routine is something that many individuals can find challenging to manage successfully (Vinter et al, 2020), with COVID bringing about unexpected changes that staff were unable to prepare individuals for. As discussed, these changes affected the running of the day, routines, facilities, and services, but they also had a significant effect on parole hearings and release dates. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2021) highlighted how this removal of services increases the risk of individuals being released without fully being 'rehabilitated'. Based on advice from Public Health England, the government introduced an 'early release scheme' during COVID, which resulted in many individuals being released back into the community early, in the hope it would reduce the spread of the virus in places of detention. The opposite appeared to happen for Edward, who was on an indeterminate sentence. COVID resulted in his parole hearings being adjourned and his sentence increasing. This caused significant distress and upset and could be argued, contributed towards a deterioration in his motivation to continue to better himself and participate in provisions on offer when restrictions began to ease. Although this may have been the case for numerous prisoners across the justice system, for individuals with autism, the need to plan and prepare for release can prove vital, especially when additional support for reasons relating to their autism, is required for them to be successful.

### 9.4.3 Introducing 'The New Norm' - Positive's arising from COVID-19

The recognition and importance of positive relationships was one major positive arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although positive relationships between staff and individuals with autism was reported in the first visit, prior to COVID, the recognition that more effort and emphasis needs to be placed on solidifying at least one key person for everyone has been established. During COVID, C Block staff were sometimes timetabled on other wings to support staff shortages, something which Fred expressed caused him significant frustration, claiming that he 'should not be punished' because other wings do not have staff. This suggests that Fred required the support from specific staff, who he felt should not be deployed elsewhere. Such staff appeared to be trusted key staff who may have been able to offer support to Fred during a challenging and unexpected time. Jonathan and Emma both spoke openly about quickly establishing new relationships as well as maintaining positive relationships with

individuals on the wing, stating that it allows them to offer personalised support, which in-turn can enable positive outcomes.

Only one participant within this study referred to utilising video calling during COVID. This was one way in which prisons tried to support individuals to stay in contact with family members during COVID. Although Daniel reported his dislike of this technology, this provision could still benefit individuals after COVID, especially if family and friends are unable to visit. Video calling can also be easy to implement and manage, compared to a large visiting hall with individuals having to be searched prior to entering, which may cause psychological effects on them. Adam, who was interviewed prior to COVID, may have found this form of communication beneficial, especially given that distance was a factor in his decline in family relationships. Nevertheless, an increase in phone calls and phone credit did support positive interactions with friends and family, with Fred reporting that he speaks to his mother "more than ever."

## 9.5 Summary – What works for whom, under what circumstances and why?

The implementation of C Block worked for all participants, in different ways. The mechanisms introduced significantly contributed towards positive outcomes for individuals with autism. With the wing acting separately from the mainstream part of the prison, flexibility to the rules and regimes were made without being challenges or restricted by prison policies. All participants within this study spoke positively about the wing, especially when comparing it to other prison establishments or other wings within Prison AA. This solidifies that C Block is successful and works for individuals with autism, due to trained staff being able to implement appropriate and effective adjustments and adaptations to support their needs. Recognition of autism, typical behaviours, challenges associated with autism and strategies on how to overcome and remove barriers appear to have been considered when working alongside the NAS, all with the aim to produce positive outcomes.

Interactions with non-disabled prisoners did work for some individuals when they were given the opportunity to participate in services and facilities off C Block. These interactions were not always facilitated by staff from C Block, but as with Fred, were still successful and something he desired. Although this worked for Fred, others may need support in facilitating appropriate conversations with non-disabled prisoners, such as Adam, who found himself in conflicts when he was unsupported on a different wing. Adam still struggled to interact with his peers on C Block, but instead would speak to Jonathan, indicating that he prefers the company of staff as they are predictable. Nonetheless, participating in any form of social communication is positive and increases social inclusion and the ability to form positive social bonds. All participants within this study were able to discuss a positive

relationship inside the prison, suggesting that knowledgeable staff's support, along with a greater understanding amongst the prison community due to shared experiences, can promote positive relationships.

What appeared to work best was when trained staff supported the holistic needs of individuals with autism, implementing simple, effective, and sometimes bespoke adaptations to encourage positive outcomes. This was evident within the education department on C Block, where classes were smaller, more structured, and reduced in length, enabling greater focus and attention, increasing success, however when required more bespoke education was introduced, like the examples given by Daniel throughout this thesis. The introduction of a mental health nurse, a sensory room and a therapy dog are all examples of a supportive environment which is committed to positive outcomes for individuals with autism. Adaptations on C Block were not forced upon individuals but instead used in everyday life; 'the new norm' such as increased communication skills, visual aids on the walls and single cell occupancy creating an environment which intends to minimise stress and anxiety. Not all adaptations were successful for all individuals, however this is not realistic to envision, as individual needs differ, with age, experiences, family history, personal interests and current circumstances can all impact their mental well-being, participation levels and ability to cope with in prison.

However, what is unclear is why such adaptations and adjustments could not be implemented across all parts of the prison, enabling an inclusive whole prison approach to supporting individuals with autism, rather than 'isolation for support'. This approach does not support a social model perspective but instead creates an ideology where individuals with autism require specialist support therefore are in need of segregation to receive it. It is recognised that some adjustments may be challenging to implement across the mainstream part of the prison, such as single cells, fewer individuals residing on the wing or being the first wing to receive medication daily. However, in attempt to promote autism awareness across the prison population, it could be an initial step in encouraging an inclusive approach, enabling individuals with autism to receive effective support, whilst being surrounded by non-disabled prisoners too.

## 9.6 Recommendations for future development

**- Reflection.** Prison environments can be challenging, overwhelming and hard work, however, what is needed more in order to grow and develop is time to reflect. Personal reflection, as well as time with other colleagues and members of staff, allows a collective approach to learn from past experiences,

problem solve and create alternative solutions which may produce better outcomes for individuals with autism.

**- Processing time.** Too often sanctions are implemented without taking the time to unpick the circumstances which led to the perceived negative behaviour. Allowing individuals time alone to calm down is positive, however staff also need time to process the incident and unpick it before appropriate consequences are imposed. This should, I believe, be best practice across all parts of the prison, not just within specialist units such as C Block.

**- Greater awareness amongst all of the prison community.** C Block operated as an isolated wing, segregating those who are in need of additional support. This creates an imagery of such individuals as 'vulnerable', a negative connotation which is imposed on somebody by non-disabled people. Having trained staff amongst all areas within the prison may allow for more adjustments and adaptations to be implemented across all wings, enabling individuals with autism to access appropriate levels of support within the mainstream part of the wing, reducing the need for isolation. Although this would present challenges, it does create a more inclusive society which removes reliance on particular staff to offer support.

**- Introduction of personal support plans/personal profiles.** When a prisoner arrives in prison, information is not always obtained from any previous incidents, and new information is not always shared with relevant individuals, departments, or agencies. This can often prevent a multiagency approach of support. If individuals with autism are to reside on C Block, staff who work there know them very well, therefore support plans including details on their individual needs and strategies on how to support them, should be created and documented. This can then be regularly updated and shared with relevant professionals across the prison, such as if a classroom change occurs, they apply for a new job, attend the gym for their purposeful activity etc. Additionally, this information can quickly be shared with external agencies such as probation workers, solicitors, or Offender Management Workers, to ensure that individual needs are understood, and appropriate support is given.

**- Training around the importance of language.** Taking a social model perspective, this thesis recognised some of the language used throughout interviews as well as with documentations which could be perceived as negative. These include 'vulnerable', 'kick off' and 'something wrong with them'. Such words may cause harm and offensive to some individuals with autism, therefore, to reduce the risk of this, disability friendly terminology should be always used.

**- Introduction and recognition of sensory sensitivities within a prison environment.** C Block had introduced a sensory room, suggesting they had recognised the need for a quiet and relaxing space for individuals with autism. However, this space could only be used by certain individuals, who displayed 'correct behaviour', restricting some individuals who may need this space the most, and are dysregulated due to sensory sensitivities. Implementing sensory adjustments across the entire prison, such as eye masks, ear plugs or weighted blankets could all support the sensory sensitivities of individuals with autism, increasing positive outcomes.

**- Increased, autism specific questions, upon induction.** Early intervention is key, and with appropriate support, positive outcomes can be achieved. Individuals within this study who went straight to C Block could be perceived as 'the lucky ones' as their pathway of support was identified from the start, reducing their anxiety, stress, and potentially negative experiences on a different wing. Additionally, there is no widely used screening tool which prisons can refer to in order to identify individuals with autism who may not disclose their diagnosis. To help combat this, more specific questions, for all individuals upon induction, that relate to typical behaviours and characterises of autism, may be useful. These could be adapted from questionnaires many healthcare professionals use when completing the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) assessment within the community. Such questions would be then asked of all individuals entering prison, therefore not identifying anybody as different but instead creating 'a new norm' of identification.

**- The NAS to involve individuals with autism, who have experienced prison, in developing and testing the prison standards.** Individuals with autism are experts of their own experiences and not including these within the development and testing stage of the prison standards would be doing them a disservice. There is a lot that can be learnt from the experiences of individuals with autism, who have spent time in prisons across the UK. Such experiences should be heard and learnt from, especially if the standards are to help create continued positive outcomes for individuals with autism, currently serving a sentence in a UK prison.

- **Greater focus on induction processes.** The induction is the initial stages of an individual's prison journey. This is where pathways of support are developed. Without a robust induction process, with trained and specialist staff to offer support and advice, many individuals with autism may be missed and consequently may not receive adequate support to produce positive outcomes.

### 9.6.1 The future of prisons for individuals with autism

Prevalence rates of individuals diagnosed with autism has drastically increased (DoH, 2023). This, coupled with policies, guidance and specific legislation all introduced to support their individual needs, it could be argued that awareness of the condition 'autism' has increased. However, an increase in awareness does not directly link to an increase in understanding, acceptance and the ability to make reasonable adjustments. For individuals with autism travelling through the justice system, it is apparent that the desire and need for criminal justice professionals to have a greater awareness and understanding of autism is recognised, but without dedicated and protected time for specific training this will be challenging. If more attention was given to including autism specific awareness training on officers mandatory training, more new officers would feel prepared to support such individuals better. Within a 'one size fits all' system that focuses on 'punishment to rehabilitate' individuals with autism will continue to struggle to make a positive change. There are pockets of good practice across prisons in the UK, however, many have adopted a 'segregation for support' approach. If individuals with autism are to be successful, such approaches need to be adapted and implemented within the mainstream part of the prison, making such adjustments part of the prison culture. Creating a sense of acceptance and understanding not only with staff, but also other prisoners, is vital for full inclusion. This could be done by introducing coffee mornings, planning events or offering information all to enhance understanding. Additionally, the design and construction of any future prisons may also consider the environmental factors which could impact individuals with autism. In order for this to be successful, as previously stated, a greater awareness and understanding of autism is required. Such accommodations and considerations could significantly impact an individual's sensory sensitivities, increasing their chances of positive outcomes. Without accommodations, considerations and adjustments made individuals with autism will continue to travel through the justice system, often unrecognised and unsupported. This may continue to contribute towards an increase in re-offending rates, as appropriate support and interventions have not been implemented to encourage a positive change. Without a drive for inclusion, spearheaded by confident, aware and knowledgeable criminal justice professionals, individuals with autism who do receive support, may be continuously segregated and isolated from the mainstream; promoting a medical model ideology.

## 9.7 Final thoughts

Completing this research was fascinating! The instant rapport I built with participants was amazing, providing me with raw and rich data. Such relationships felt effortless to form and I feel strongly about

such bonds always being at the forefront before any personal information can be shared. I understand the pressures and challenges prisons face when adapting policies and procedures for individuals who have been convicted of committing crimes, however, if rehabilitation and personal progress is to be made, this has to become a priority, rather than focusing solely on the mechanism's which produce desired outcomes – more context is required! Although this study was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt that it only added more rich data, which should be listened to, and experiences drawn upon to prevent harsh restrictions drastically affecting prisons should such situations arise within the future. The voices throughout this study are relevant and important and should be heard to support future development for individuals with autism.

# 10. Chapter Ten: References

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## 10.2 Legislation


Autism Act 2009

Care Act 2014

Equality Act 2010

Mental Health Act 1983: Code of Practice 2015

The Prison Rules 1999


## 10.3 Legal cases


R (Gill) v Secretary of State for Justice (2010) EWHC 364 (Admin)

# 11. Chapter Eleven: Appendices

## 11.1 Photo One – Classroom on C Block

## 11.2 Photo Two – Classroom on C Block

## 11.3 Photo Three – Single cell

## 11.4 Photo Four – Art mural on C Block

## 11.5 Photo Five – Savoury on C Block

## 11.6 Photo Six – Art mural and mailbox on C Block

## 11.7 Photo Seven – Stone Dragon outside prison walls