

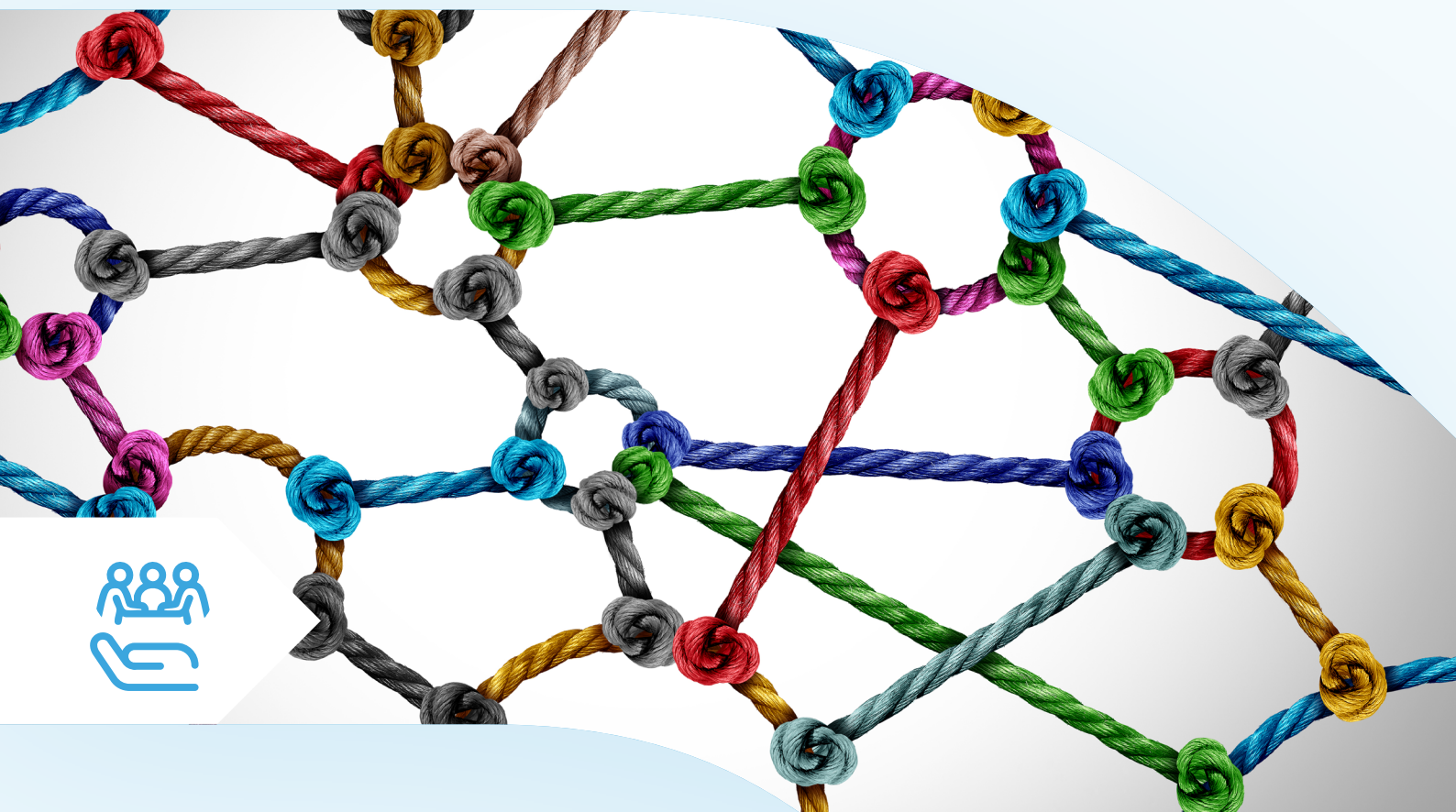
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Public sector impact studies

Prisons: Neurodiversity Unit at HMP Pentonville





The problem

The standard prison environment, particularly within large, Victorian-era buildings like HMP Pentonville, is characterised by high sensory load, rigid regimes, and social volatility. Such an environment is especially ill-suited for neurodiverse individuals, including those with autism spectrum conditions, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and other learning or communication difficulties.

For this population, the standard prison regime can create heightened anxiety and distress, leading to maladaptive behaviours such as aggression, self-harm, and non-compliance. In the current system, such individuals are generally managed through reactive, security-focused measures, creating a cycle of escalating conflict and a disproportionate drain on staff time, without addressing the underlying causes of their behaviour.

This public sector impact study is based on a talk at Productivity Pitches, a series of events hosted by the Institute for Government and The Productivity Institute, which aims to share and support ways to improve public sector performance levels. The talk is available to watch on the [Institute for Government's website](#).



The innovation

HMP Pentonville established a dedicated Neurodiversity Unit which was used to deliver a more personalised approach, where staff could ensure that they were meeting the needs of neurodiverse prisoners. The key components of the intervention were:

Environmental adaptation: A previously mothballed landing was repurposed to create a low-stimulus, predictable environment. This involved procedural changes (e.g., staff knocking before entering cells) and physical adaptations designed to reduce sensory overload like the provision of J-cloths to clean dishes, which are softer than the standard scouring pads.

Resource reallocation: The Unit operates with a higher staff-to-prisoner ratio than the general prison population. This was achieved by reconfiguring existing staffing allocations to permit more intensive, relational engagement. Staff were selected based on their willingness to adopt a therapeutic approach, and to take the time to learn more about individuals' backgrounds and needs. Crucially, this higher ratio allowed staff to resolve administrative stressors, such as sorting out phone numbers, immediately rather than making prisoners wait. This removed a common flashpoint for frustration and aggression.

A therapeutic regime: A structured programme of therapeutic activities was implemented, including occupational therapy, speech and language support, art, yoga, and animal-assisted therapy featuring the unit's popular therapy dog, Dobby.





The impact

The evaluation of the Unit's efficacy to date has been primarily qualitative and observational, with a more formal, longitudinal evaluation planned in collaboration with the national prison service's evidence-based team. The initial findings are significant:

- *Reduction in negative incidents:* There has been a marked reduction in critical incidents on the Unit. Reports of self-harm and prisoner-on-staff violence are described as being "virtually nil", a stark contrast to the baseline rates in the main prison.
- *Organisational impact:* The model has demonstrated a profound positive impact on staff morale and wellbeing. The unit has a 100% staff retention rate, with officers only leaving upon securing a promotion.
- *Qualitative data:* Testimonials from prisoners have been highly positive, with published accounts praising the supportive environment and the transformative impact of the personalised approach.

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Takeaways

The Pentonville Neurodiversity Unit highlights the power of letting frontline staff drive change. The catalyst for the project was the team's experience with 'Jay', a young man with foetal alcohol syndrome, communication difficulties, and a traumatic history. Witnessing how standard prison protocols led to his repeated segregation when he clearly needed support, the team refused to accept this failure as inevitable.

Instead, they spent 18 months building a better solution from the ground up and this effort required them to solve a wide range of problems. They tackled everything from the abstract challenge of designing a new programme to physical hurdles like old pipes and cockroaches. They even persevered against colleagues who worried the Unit would be too soft on prisoners.

This case also proves the vital role of senior leadership. The project succeeded without any new funding. Managers simply reassigned existing staff to the new unit and supported the team's decision to select officers who genuinely cared about the mission. Crucially, those leaders protected the team from the pressure to return those resources to general duties during busy periods. This consistent support gave the innovation the time and stability it needed to prove its worth.

Finally, the project succeeded because the team took the time to understand the root of the problem. They realised that aggressive behaviour was often a predictable reaction to a harsh environment that clashed with the prisoners' needs. By identifying this mismatch, the team was able to redesign the regime, shifting the focus away from punishment and toward therapy. This proactive approach removed the triggers for conflict before they could start and so prevented the escalation of behaviour. The prison was then also able to avoid the costs of punishment, both to the prisoner and to the state. By preventing these costs, the team succeeded in creating greater productivity.



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