

The Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet Pilot Project



UNIVERSITY OF
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Executive Summary

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February 4th 2015

This project was funded by: Autism Hampshire, Hampshire Constabulary, and The Appropriate Adult Service.

Statement of authorship

The research was independently conducted and reported by Dr Sarah Parsons (Principal Investigator) and Dr Gina Sherwood (Researcher) at the University of Southampton. The funding partner organisations agreed the general focus of the pilot project and also supported initial access to research sites and participants. The conduct of the research, including choice of interviewees, lines of questioning and the analysis and interpretation of the data were decided and managed independently by the authors.

The views expressed in this report, drawing on the views expressed by participants, are the authors' own.

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How to cite this executive summary

Parsons, S. & Sherwood, G. (2015) *The Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet Pilot Project – Executive Summary*. The University of Southampton. Available at: www.widgit.com

How to cite the main report

Parsons, S. & Sherwood, G. (2015) *The Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet Pilot Project – Final Report*. The University of Southampton. Available at: www.widgit.com

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the funding partner organisations that supported this research financially while also providing the project with the academic freedom to pursue independent research questions and activities. This research would not have been possible without the substantial practical and logistical support of Hampshire Constabulary, Autism Hampshire and The Appropriate Adult Service. In addition, we are very grateful to Widgit Software for their support of the project and permission to use Widgit Symbols in the pilot materials and this report.

Our thanks and appreciation go to all of the individuals who voluntarily committed their time to the project either by participating in an interview or focus group or facilitating initial contact with potential participants. We are also very grateful to Lucy Westron who supported the project, including the production of materials for the custody teams and the collation of evidence from the research literature, during her summer (2014) research internship at the University of Southampton.

Executive Summary

Background

It is estimated that 20-30% of all offenders in the UK ‘...have learning difficulties or learning disabilities [LDD] that interfere with their ability to cope within the criminal justice system; of this group 7% will have very low IQs of less than 70’ (Jacobson, 2008; p. iii). This can create particular challenges for the Criminal Justice System (CJS), for example offenders with LDD are more likely to be restrained or isolated in prison and to be excluded from programmes that may help them to address problematic behaviour (Prison Reform Trust, 2013). In addition, inmates with LDD report high levels of bullying and abuse (Talbot, 2010). Lord Bradley (2009) conducted a review of people with mental health problems or LDD in the CJS and concluded that police and custody officers lacked skills and awareness in the identification of offenders with LDD or mental health difficulties and, therefore, required more training in these areas. In addition, Lord Bradley suggested there needed to be greater consistency in the treatment of offenders with LDD within the CJS.

As one of the groups of offenders with LDD, individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are often described as being particularly vulnerable within the CJS due to (for example) cognitive difficulties relating to understanding non-literal language and interpreting the intentions and behaviours of other people; sensory difficulties relating to lights, sounds and smells; social and communication difficulties which can exacerbate already tense situations; and obsessive adherence to routines or rituals which, if disrupted, may lead to aggressive behaviours (Chown, 2010; Paterson, 2008; Allen et al., 2007; 2008). There is no evidence to suggest that individuals with ASD are overrepresented within the CJS (King & Murphy, 2014; Allen et al., 2008) but they may have ‘predisposing features’ (King & Murphy, 2014; p.2717) that may lead to committing a crime, and once within the CJS, may find the context and procedures particularly difficult (Allen et al., 2007).

There are many suggestions for ways in which the CJS can improve its response to, and support for, people with LDD (e.g. Bradley, 2009; HMIP, 2014). One of the areas in which improvements could be made is in how information is provided to offenders and inmates. Talbot (2010) highlights that ‘prisons are largely paper-based regimes’ (p.36) and this means that for any offender who may have difficulties with reading and / or writing, navigating and understanding the systems of the CJS can be a significant challenge. Lord Bradley (2009) identified the first contact with the police as the ‘...point in the offender pathway [that] provides the greatest opportunity to effect change’ (p.34). Moreover, the Prison Reform Trust’s *No One Knows* report (Jacobson, 2008) highlighted that: ‘Custody officers in particular need a range of skills to identify effectively the kinds of support needed by people who come into police detention’ (p.iii). Consequently, better training of staff coupled with the provision of more appropriately tailored information for offenders at the point of risk assessment in custody could be areas where there is a possibility for implementing changes that might have a positive impact on the experiences of offenders.

The current project

A pilot project was carried out in Hampshire that aimed to change one aspect of the risk assessment process for individuals entering custody; specifically, the use of a more accessible ‘rights and entitlements’ information sheet presented in a symbol-based format (the Widgit Symbol custody sheets). As one of the first, formal, paper-based processes that individuals experience when they enter the CJS this represents an opportunity to make a positive change at one of the earliest possible occasions.

The pilot project took place in the context of a well-established partnership between Autism Hampshire and Hampshire Constabulary which has supported autism awareness training since 2008 for more than 3,000 frontline officers with a further 3,000 being trained from 2015. The

idea for the creating more accessible information for people in custody started with a custody nurse who approached Autism Hampshire and asked if the organisation could support her work around looking at developing a custody sheet to support her client base. Autism Hampshire approached Hampshire Constabulary who were supportive of taking the idea forward, and subsequently, the company Widgit Software to develop and support this work. The team at the University of Southampton was approached to conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation of the Widgit Symbol sheets in custody once the content of the sheets was mostly finalised.

The specific aims of the project were:

1. To provide an evidence-based rationale for establishing a common set of accessible information sheets that are in a standardised format and could eventually be rolled out nationwide; and
2. To find out the views of police officers' when using the materials in relation to (a) the acceptability / feasibility of using the materials in custody and (b) perceptions about how people in custody responded to the materials.

Methodology

This research took a qualitative approach to meeting these aims by (1) implementing the Widgit Symbol custody sheets in two Hampshire Constabulary custody centres for a pilot period of 4 weeks and (2) exploring the views and perceptions about the Widgit Symbol custody sheets of key stakeholders, including custody inspectors and sergeants, through individual interviews and focus groups.

Following ethical approval for the project from the University of Southampton the Widgit Symbol custody sheets were used in two custody centres for a period of 4 weeks during August-September 2014. The sheets were available across all shifts and information about the pilot communicated to all teams initially by the custody Inspectors and then through the custody Sergeants. Custody personnel were asked to use their discretion in deciding to whom to give the Widgit Symbol leaflet in addition to the 'standard' rights and entitlements leaflet that is given to all detainees entering custody (Figure 1a & b).

The sheets were not intended to be ASD specific and custody teams were briefed to give the Widgit version to 'anyone who you think may be vulnerable or have difficulties communicating and understanding'. Additional information using the symbol format was also provided in a separate folder, which contained individual laminated sheets regarding specific aspects of processes and procedures such as 'If you are ill' and 'Your DNA' (Figure 1c); three copies of the folder were given to one custody centre and one folder to the other.

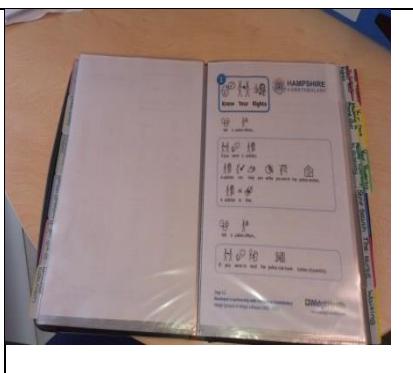
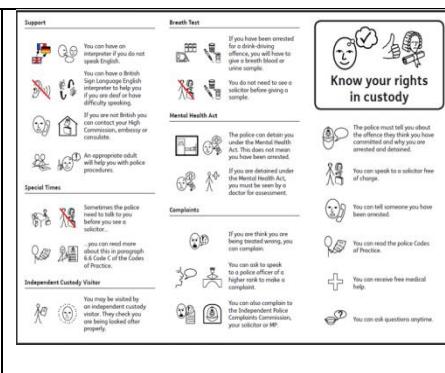
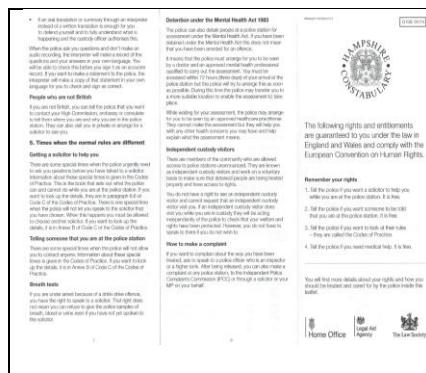


Fig 1a: Standard rights and entitlements leaflet

Fig 1b: Widgit Symbol rights and entitlements leaflet

Fig 1c: Additional laminated Widgit Symbol information

At the end of the 4-week pilot implementation, follow-up interviews were conducted with 14 custody personnel (including Inspectors and Sergeants) to seek their feedback about the Widgit Symbol sheets. In addition, a range of stakeholders both within and outside the CJS were interviewed to gauge their opinions about the Widgit Symbol custody sheets. These stakeholders included: people on the autism spectrum and their families; Appropriate Adults; and senior personnel within the CJS. No offenders were observed during the pilot implementation and so there is no direct evaluation of the use of the custody sheets with offenders within a custody context.

Participants

In total, 41 people were included in this pilot project, 29 in the form of individual interviews and 12 in small focus groups of 3 people. This number comprised 14 custody personnel involved in the 4-week pilot implementation; three parents and three young people on the autism spectrum took; one young person and two support workers from the Youth Offending Team (YOT); one parent of a child with autism, and one adult couple with learning disabilities; eight Appropriate Adults; and seven senior personnel within the CJS (three solicitors, two managers from the YOT, one manager for a magistrate's court, and one magistrate).

Findings

Overall, the main findings of the pilot implementation of the Widgit Symbol custody sheets were:

- The total number of Widgit Symbol rights and entitlements leaflets given out to people entering custody was lower (3.8%) than would be expected based on the average numbers of young and vulnerable people with LDD in the CJS (20-30%; Jacobsen, 2008);
- Of those given the sheets (n=27), eight were aged under eighteen, most (23) were male and of White British ethnic origin (25);
- Only three detainees were also shown some of the additional Widgit information sheets from the black folder, all relating to health issues;
- The most commonly mentioned reasons for giving the Widgit leaflet to those entering custody were depression and self-harm, other mental health difficulties, substance abuse, and dyslexia / difficulties reading and writing;
- Overwhelmingly, the response to the Widgit symbol sheets from custody personnel involved in the pilot, as well as other stakeholders both with and without direct experience of the CJS, was positive;
- Most interviewees thought that the sheets were a good idea because they helped to make information more accessible for those who needed this;
- Custody personnel mentioned that the use of the sheets helps to provide a more holistic, professional and robust approach to dealing with offenders while in custody;
- Many participants felt that the sheets would be useful for a wide range of people entering custody;
- More people than those giving the opposite view felt that the sheets should be given to everyone entering custody;
- Some participants (a minority), felt that the sheets could be interpreted as insulting and unhelpful by some people entering custody;
- Many participants highlighted the importance of consistency in where and how the Widgit sheets might be used, for example, in all custody centres and also across different areas of the CJS (in the courts, in prison, within the probation service);
- Helpful suggestions were provided for improving the sheets should they be used more widely in the future including more use of colour and bold type, and showing a clearer sequence of events;

- Most custody personnel felt that the best way of introducing the sheets to custody centres would be via verbal briefings and face-to-face training;
- Such training should emphasise the reasons for using Widgit symbols and the fact that a pilot implementation has already taken place, with positive outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the response from custody personnel to the Widgit Symbol sheets was positive; they felt that the sheets had benefits both for the person coming into custody, as well as for the custody teams: (i) as a way of explaining jargon for anyone coming into custody (not just those with ASD) and (ii) in enabling custody personnel to provide a professional and robust service, where individual needs were appropriately taken into account. It was emphasised by some that the Widgit Symbol sheets should not be seen as a replacement for verbal interaction and support with helping the detained person to understand what was happening. Nevertheless, many respondents felt that the sheets could be used more widely within the CJS, including in court, as part of a consistent approach to the presentation of information. Although there were a few concerns expressed about giving the sheets to all those entering custody, the views of most personnel involved in the pilot were very positive. This provides a very encouraging basis for further developing and implementing this approach in the future.

This pilot project was small-scale and focused on the perceptions of a range of stakeholders both within and outside the CJS. Consequently, we do not know from this pilot project to what extent the use of the Widgit Symbol sheets made a difference to those receiving them in custody.

Further development of the sheets

1. The Widgit Symbol custody sheet development team should carefully consider the list of suggestions for improvements or changes to the current version to see which, if any, are reasonable to implement;
2. Any revised versions of the materials as a result of the feedback from this pilot implementation could be checked with the teams involved in the pilot to seek their views;

Further use of the Widgit Symbol custody sheets

3. Following any revisions to the Widgit symbol materials, a wider implementation of the sheets could be carried out across all custody centres under the jurisdiction of Hampshire Constabulary;
4. If such a wider implementation took place, custody teams should be briefed verbally via face-to-face training sessions about (i) the purpose and rationale for the sheets (ii) how the sheets should be used (with differentiation made between the initial rights and entitlements leaflet and the supplementary sheets in the folder) (iii) the evidence base so far about the use of the sheets and (iv) the importance of providing a professional service to all those entering custody;
5. During such an implementation, the use of the Widgit Symbol sheets would need to be endorsed by senior personnel within Hampshire Constabulary and the use of the sheets mandated for all persons entering custody;
6. Training or awareness raising regarding any wider implementation of the sheets should include other personnel who regularly come into contact with people detained in custody such as Appropriate Adults, social workers, health professionals, and solicitors;
7. Any wider implementation should be appropriately and independently evaluated, including, if possible, obtaining feedback (directly or via observation) of detained persons;
8. Any wider implementation should consider whether there is scope to extend the use and display of symbol-based information within other contexts of the CJS (such as information posters within custody centres; information immediately following arrest; information available in court).

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