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Experiences of prison officers delivering Five Minute Interventions at HMP/YOI Portland

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This report summarises qualitative research into the experiences of prison officers implementing the Five Minute Intervention Project (FMI) at Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institution (HMP/YOI) Portland. The FMI project trained prison officers to turn everyday conversations with prisoners into rehabilitative interventions. The study was funded by NOMS to understand how FMI may contribute to a positive rehabilitative environment in custody. Ten officers trained in FMI were interviewed at six-weekly intervals between June and October 2013, and their accounts of their conversations with prisoners were compared to ten officers who were not trained in FMI.

Key findings

A typology defined officers as Rehabilitative, Pre-Rehabilitative, Frustrated or Disengaged, referring to their motivation and ability to engage in rehabilitative efforts with prisoners.

Positive **process** changes over time were observed in the FMI officer group:

- Officers demonstrated improvements in the skill of rehabilitative conversation that were not seen in the comparison group.
- The FMI officers appeared better able than comparison group colleagues to address underlying criminogenic needs.
- Some FMI officers moved type to become Rehabilitative officers.

For the successful delivery of FMIs, the following were identified as key components:

- A focus on building rapport with prisoners before FMIs began.
- Creating opportunities as well as seizing ad hoc chances to use FMIs.
- Using a range of FMI skills, other skills and clear motivations to address prisoners' issues.

The **outcomes** associated with FMI perceived by officers were:

- Improved relationships with prisoners.
- Increased job satisfaction.
- Observable improvements in prisoners' thinking skills.
- Observable improvements in prisoners' self-efficacy and problem-solving abilities.

These changes and outcomes were observed despite the project taking place at a time of considerable national organisational change, with associated anxieties for the staff group involved.

Context

The National Offender Management Service's Commissioning Intentions stress the importance of rehabilitative cultures in prisons. Prison officers can help create a rehabilitative environment by adopting a positive attitude to prisoners and rehabilitation, and using particular skills. The attitude should be one of optimism about rehabilitation which is conveyed to prisoners. The skills are directed at improving prisoners' thinking and behavioural skills, building strong relationships with them, and helping them set and achieve goals that aim towards a life of desistance.

The notion of a 'Five Minute Intervention' (FMI) was developed at Portland, to encourage prison officers to use everyday conversations with a prisoner as a chance to address a particular criminogenic need and/or encourage a new outlook. Officers were trained over two days to consciously use certain skills in their conversations with prisoners, including:

- Socratic questioning – where questions are structured in a way that helps people think about their assumptions, or seek more evidence for their views, or work through the probable consequences of their intentions.
- Giving and receiving feedback – especially giving positive feedback on achievements, both small and large.
- Active listening – taking more time to hear and understand the underlying issues behind an issue or a problem that a prisoner has raised.
- Giving hope – actively taking opportunities to communicate encouragement and hope that prisoners are able to desist from offending.

HMP/YOI Portland has a capacity of 530 and houses a mixture of young offenders and category C adult offenders.

Aims and objectives

The specific research questions were:

- How did officers describe their everyday interactions with prisoners?
- Was FMI delivered as intended?
- How did FMI impact on officers' rehabilitation orientation, job satisfaction and attitudes towards prisoners?

- How did FMI impact on officers' ability to recognise antisocial thinking and attitudes and to use behavioural principles in response?
- Did officers describe any changes to the 'thinking nature' of the prison culture?

Method

Ten residential officers from four of the seven wings at Portland were selected to pilot FMI. Volunteers from two of the other three wings were selected as a comparison group and were interviewed but not given FMI training.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a topic guide with the FMI officers and the comparison group of non-FMI officers. Interviews were conducted at three time points by an independent chartered forensic psychologist who was not part of the analytical team or the FMI delivery team. Forty-eight interviews were conducted in total: eight FMI and eight comparison officers interviewed at three time points: in June 2013 before the training, six weeks after the training in August 2013, and three months after the training in October 2013.

Throughout the summary these stages are referred to as 'Sweep 1, 2 and 3'. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

		Condition	
		FMI	Control
Gender	Female	4	3
	Male	20	21
Length of service	0–3 years	0	0
	4–6 years	3	4
	7–9 years	5	8
	10–15 years	9	10
	> 15 years	7	2

The interviews were transcribed verbatim then analysed by the authors using the Framework approach¹ in NVivo 10. Framework is a case- and theme-based approach to analysis that involves summarising data into matrices where each row is a participant and each column is a theme relevant to the intervention. Analysis then draws out the range of experiences and views, identifying similarities and differences, and interrogating the data to explain emergent patterns and findings.

¹ Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C. & Ormston, R. (2013) *Qualitative Research Practice*, London: Sage.

A typology was developed that classified officers according to their beliefs and behaviours relevant to rehabilitation. Identifying these groups facilitated a more refined approach to answering the research questions. The typology encompassed seven dimensions across two themes:

- **Officers' vision/orientation** – optimism that change is possible; belief that rehabilitation is part of the job; level of empathy.
- **Officers' actions** – use of FMI skills; engagement in FMI-style interventions/making conversations count; constructive relationships with prisoners; resilience to operational pressures.

The findings consider the interrelationship between three different features of the FMI – the context of working, the process of delivery and outcomes associated with the intervention.

Results

Foundations

In the first set of interviews, before FMI training, the officers spoke about a number of issues that they felt inhibited their ability to hold rehabilitative conversations with prisoners:

- Low morale, related to concerns about potential role changes and national changes to staffing levels in prisons.
- A complex group of prisoners, some of whom had serious mental health and/or behavioural issues that could lead to a stressful wing environment; concerns that training had not sufficiently equipped staff to manage these people well.

Unfortunately there are a minority of prisoners that are absolutely... to be fair more ill than they are bad.

(FMI officer, sweep 2)

- Concern about the 'revolving door' of reoffending/re-imprisonment; and lack of 'through the gate' transitional care.
- Fear of insufficient capacity to engage in rehabilitative activities – officers perceived that they lacked sufficient time to talk in depth with prisoners.

Views about rehabilitation were underpinned by the 'rehabilitative orientation' of the officers. A typology was developed that defined officers as:

- **Rehabilitative officer:** These officers expressed the belief that rehabilitative work is a good use of officer time for all or almost all prisoners. Although they could struggle with certain skills, they clearly described using rehabilitative skills and making opportunities count. While some pragmatically discussed barriers to rehabilitation, these did not prevent them from having rehabilitative conversations, or from conveying positivity to prisoners. Rehabilitative officers were found both in the FMI group before FMI training, and in the non-FMI (comparison) group.
- **Pre-rehabilitative officer:** Officers in this group also expressed the belief that rehabilitative work is valuable and an important part of their role. However while they might have constructive relationships with prisoners and discuss some skills, their accounts did not clearly reflect advanced rehabilitative approaches. As is implied in the label for the group, officers would be classed as 'Rehabilitative' if they developed the skills to encourage rehabilitation.
- **Frustrated officer:** These officers expressed a degree of support for rehabilitative actions but were fixated on what they perceived to be barriers preventing them from pursuing these actions, such as lack of time. Frustrated officers showed a range of different skill levels, including individuals who were engaged in some rehabilitative activities.
- **Disengaged officer:** In some interviews officers described having little or no faith in the potential for prisoners to rehabilitate. Correspondingly they were not engaged with rehabilitative activities.

Early experiences of FMI

Officers had some criticisms of the FMI training but also described and demonstrated a number of benefits including improved knowledge of rehabilitative skills. This was felt to come both from the trainers and from hearing about the experiences of other officers during the training.

There were some early issues with implementing FMI which highlighted the importance of having a bed-in period before evaluating interventions:

- Officers initially struggled to find opportunities for FMIs, and had to broaden their scope in terms of who to target.
- The time taken to deliver FMIs varied considerably so some officers felt that limited capacity may undermine delivery.

It's difficult to have that time to say right, can I really make a difference?
(FMI officer, sweep 2)

- The cultural shift in becoming an interventionist was a challenge for some officers. Consequently there was an initial tendency for some officers to lack confidence in their ability to deliver effectively.

[Sometimes] you want to just chat back normally, but you have to stop and think, 'I need to ask it in this way and that way'... just changing the way that I talk to people really... It's been really difficult to get into the habit of, like, you know, asking open questions and letting the prisoners think for themselves rather than preaching at them.
(FMI officer, sweep 3)

Longer-term changes

In the longer term, some clear positive changes were observed in the FMI group:

- Their descriptions of their conversations indicated that it became easier to find and develop FMI opportunities with a broad range of prisoners.

Whereas before I used to consciously think 'right, you're the guy I'm doing the FMI with'... it's pretty much taken over and... like it doesn't matter who it is. (FMI officer, sweep 3)

- The FMI officers described better recognition of underlying criminogenic issues.
- FMI officers demonstrated improvements in delivering and effectively managing some challenging conversations with prisoners. This positive progress was underpinned by experience and practice effects.
- Some Frustrated and Pre-Rehabilitative officers moved type to become Rehabilitative officers.

The following were identified as key components of successful FMI delivery:

- A focus on building rapport with prisoners long before FMIs began.

I've found [FMI] easier once you get to know someone because you can build up that rapport. I've not yet tried it successfully on someone I don't know because you don't know how they're going to react.
(FMI officer, sweep 2)

- Creating a context for conversations, for example by thinking of suitable times and environments. Sometimes this meant rearranging duties and/or avoiding duplicating work other officers were doing and prioritising conversations.
- Constantly thinking of finding opportunities and seizing ad hoc chances to use FMIs. For example one officer described how lock-up is a busy time at which prisoners often ask questions. After practising FMI, the officer started asking 'Why did I help you this time?' or 'Why did I not help you this time?' This encouraged prisoners to reflect on their behaviour.
- Using a range of FMI skills, other skills and clear motivations to address prisoners' issues.

Below is a composite example to demonstrate how FMI was successfully used:

Officer works with prisoner to change vocational course

When and where: The officer was approached by the prisoner on the wing for advice about how to change his work detail.

Who with: The officer already knew the prisoner and had good existing rapport.

Initiated: By the prisoner wanting the officer to tell him how to change courses – he had made a similar request a few days earlier.

Topic: The prisoner wanted the officer to make the change of course happen. The officer instead encouraged him to take ownership of his own future.

Approach: Socratic questions and motivational interviewing. Also to encourage perspective taking from the receiver's viewpoint.

I asked him what he could do to help with this change of job? Who he thought he should speak to? How he should go about speaking to those people, to get him to suggest what he feels he should say to that person? I said if you were in the person's shoes what would you want to hear from someone? (FMI officer, sweep 3)

Outcome: The prisoner realised that he had some control over his life in prison. The brief intervention helped release the problem-solving potential that was always within the prisoner. The FMI also helped the prisoner realise that the officer did have time for him.

Outcomes

Officers described a number of early positive outcomes that they perceived were associated with FMI:

- Improved ability to find opportunities for and to manage rehabilitative interventions with prisoners.
- Improved rapport and relationships with prisoners.

I would say I was never very good at praising prisoners for their efforts, and when you think about it everyone likes to be praised if they've done something right and there's no reason they shouldn't be if they're making the right decisions and going down the right lines. (FMI officer, sweep 3)

- Possible long-term time savings associated with getting prisoners to think for themselves.

I'm hoping somebody's sitting in their cell thinking hold on a minute I don't need to ask that – he's just going to ask me what I think I should do so maybe I can figure it out for myself. (FMI officer, sweep 2)

- Increased job satisfaction associated with implementing FMI.
- Improvements in prisoners' thinking skills.

- Improvements in prisoners' self-efficacy and problem-solving abilities.

[He learned] that he has some control over his own destiny within the prison. It's not all a 'you do what we say' type of scenario. (FMI officer, sweep 2)

Implications

Not every officer demonstrated a rehabilitative ethos. This research has identified several potential ways of engaging officers with rehabilitation. These included:

- highlighting positive outcomes by making the value of interventions clear; and
- improving information sharing about best practice between officers.

The need for performance management with some staff was also felt to be a barrier to rehabilitation, with officers feeling that there was a need to identify and motivate poorly performing officers and those not attempting to engage in rehabilitation. In addition, supervision was perceived to be a key part of any rehabilitation activity to support those delivering services, to discuss challenges and share success in order to keep performance heading in the desired direction. FMI officers considered that supervision must be available if FMI is expanded in the future.

The prison officers interviewed within this study described using FMI techniques in ways linked to positive short-term outcomes, enhancing the potential of the officers themselves, prisoners and prisons. If FMI is to be introduced in other establishments it is recommended that delivery is supported by further evaluation of intervention efficacy, for example through a quasi-experimental design that matches approximately eight to ten FMI prison wings with a comparison wing. Measurement should be triangulated to include (i) psychometric tests pre- and post-FMI delivery that assess occupational well-being, (ii) in-depth interviews with officers, and (iii) in-depth interviews with prisoners.