



Prisoner experiences in HMP Durham

About Healthwatch Newcastle

Healthwatch Newcastle is one of 152 local Healthwatch organisations established throughout England on 1 April 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We have a dual role to champion the rights of users of publicly funded health and social care services for both adults and children, and to hold the system to account for how well it engages with the public.

We collect feedback on services from people of all ages and from all communities. We do this through our network of voluntary and community sector organisations; during events, drop-in sessions and listening events at a range of venues across the city; online through the feedback centre on our website; via social media; and from callers to our 'Just ask' helpline. As part of the remit to gather views, we also have the power to 'enter and view' services and conduct announced and unannounced visits.

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Introduction

In September 2016, we approached HMP Durham to offer to carry out research on the organisation's behalf. The purpose was to:

- Allow time for people to share views and experiences of prison health and support services
- Find out what improvements could be made to health and support services within prison to support prisoners

This report aims to:

1. Help prison staff better understand prisoners' experiences of services
2. Help HM Prison Service look at new ways of engaging with prisoners to gather their opinions and raise awareness of their experiences
3. Highlight areas for improvement to commissioners and providers of prison health services
4. Help improve and introduce new ways of working and build good relations between prison staff and commissioners and providers of prison health services

Methodology

We arranged two focus groups so prisoners could share their views, opinions and experiences of prison health services. These groups were comprised of prisoners residing in F wing. The research was carried out over a four week period between 1 and 31 January 2017 and each focus group lasted two hours.

The sessions started with an introduction from Healthwatch Newcastle staff. The participants were then asked a series of set questions. They participated in informal discussions around key themes, including experiences of health services such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, mental health services and access to GPs.

Discussions explored the range of support available to prisoners at that time, obstacles to engaging with support services, and improvements that prisoners would like to see. Healthwatch Newcastle staff facilitated the focus groups with the support of a prison officer.

Findings

Eighteen male prisoners attended one of two focus groups. The following questions were asked.

What were your experiences of health services when you first entered the prison?

Delays

- I asked to see a doctor regarding my need for medication for a reflux problem – to date nothing has happened
- Takes about a week to get to see a GP – too long
- General delays in getting medication
- I waited a month for my medication from admission date
- You see the GP when you first arrive but after that it is difficult to get an appointment

- If on a short sentence there is no time to put help in place so prisoners are released with no support

Positive feedback

- You always see a nurse when you first come in
- Get a quick response from nurses (but communication issues with GPs)
- If you contact them (DART) they come and they're always about on the wing
- Help with drug and alcohol issues is good, you can get to see people quickly and often and get one-to-one support and access to group sessions
- Overall the system is okay – things get done eventually

Negative feedback

- Difficult to get help with mental health issues
- Appear to be communication problems – delays occur when information has to be passed between different people
- If you want help with smoking cessation it's initially on offer, but if you need more help than the basic service it's not available
- We are meant to get health checks on admission but this is not monitored and often doesn't happen
- You can ring health care for information but often cannot get answers
- Requests submitted to see GP are often lost in the system

Do you get help with smoking cessation?

People gave a mixed view of the smoking cessation service.

Positive feedback

- Smoking cessation services have helped one person stop smoking and he is pleased about this

Issues

- You can get e-cigs but only one a day and you have to be able to pay for them
- When people first come in it's a very difficult time and having to stop smoking at the same time only makes the stress worse, resulting in thefts, fights, etc.
- F wing is a non-smoking wing; smokers need to be moved to another wing but this can take between one and two weeks
- It would help if one end of F wing was smoking and the other was non-smoking

What are mental health services in prison like?

This received a varied response; some people were happy with them but most were not.

Delays

- One person was still waiting to get help after four weeks
- Delays in getting to see a GP results in any ongoing medication being stopped and this can be very difficult for people
- Three month delay to see psychiatrist
- I asked to see a mental health worker when I was feeling very low but it took three days for someone to get back to me
- Waiting a month for meds
- Delays in getting meds first time
- Can take up to a week to see your doctor once request put in; requests get lost
- Time delays when feeling down and asking to see someone – up to three days

- Mental health support services say they can't come to see you as they're overwhelmed
- Incident when someone asked for help at induction session; they did not get immediate help and kicked off and this resulted in being punished with removal of TV
- Buzzer left unanswered for a long time
- Staff too busy to help and inmates left on own for long time
- If need help again on another wing (drug/alcohol support) you have to begin process again and re-refer
- Reading glasses not readily available and have to be purchased in shop; not everyone who needs glasses brings theirs in on arrival – have to wait for money to purchase any
- Appointments often cancelled if emergency in prison; also hospital appointments need two staff to accompany and often cancelled because short of staff
- Stop punishing prisoners by denying medication

Medication

- We feel that the GP should be able to see what medication you are on and just keep prescribing it – no need for a further assessment
- One person was given his sleeping tablets at 3pm – by tea time he was falling asleep
- People are saying they don't need medication just to get off F wing when in reality they need it
- We don't get a say in our medication once in prison despite having a good knowledge of what works best for us
- On F wing there should be more support for prisoners on non-prescribed drugs not less as is the case – more support available on other wings
- Taken off medications for bad behaviour but it takes ages to reinstate
- Allowed drugs like paracetamol but not controlled drugs like methadone

Understanding and communication

- Lack of understanding and empathy among staff of prisoners with bipolar
- Stigma attached to mental health which stops people admitting their illness
- It is not explained how you can refer yourself for support
- Sometimes you can be locked up for up to 23 hours – this doesn't help mental health
- Prisoners ask for help from staff but don't get it
- Ring health care but they don't know what's going on
- Everyone sees the doctor when they move in but after that it falls off
- Often illness not taken seriously and not believed
- Lack of people's acceptance of bipolar
- Person can be left in cell for up to 23 hours per day – very depressing; mental health team don't communicate properly
- Information not passed on by staff between wings
- Health care needs are met but there are issues around making sure people know of services on offer and timings of services, etc.
- Staff having difficulties in accessing mental health services for prisoners
- When applying for help there is concern about confidentiality and other inmates seeing information, for example, peer support workers
- PIDS (Prisoner Information Desk Person) asks people about their mental health when first arriving in prison; people do not feel comfortable talking to other prisoners about this
- DART services are good; drug and alcohol dependency very high in prison – this wing gets lots of support

- Poor communication between GP outside and prison doctor; takes too long to be seen and once in prison medication is stopped and everything reassessed – why?
- Some prison doctors good others not – you cannot choose your GP
- Bad behaviour is rewarded
- Group discussions on mental health among prisoners – support groups would be good
- PID worker stated that the previous night 19 people with drug and alcohol issues were all seen in on day but only three with mental health – DART staff more supportive than mental health workers
- Mental health support provided in-house; people wait weeks to be seen and applications get lost in the system but this will change soon as inmates will be able to book online
- Application gets lost in the system – lots of buck-passing by staff
- If on short sentence there is no time to put help in place so released with no support
- Only get access to gym if you work or are over 40
- Mental health gym was set up and was really good but now stopped – why?
- Very little exercise – only 45 minutes per day outside
- Fixed weights to be fitted soon in exercise yard – good

What would help improve these mental health issues?

- Deal with meds quicker
- Stop punishing by denying meds = cruelty
- More mental health support – better efficiency
- Someone on the wing asked for help when feeling very low; help was not immediate so prisoner kicked off and was punished by having his TV taken away – help needs to be timely.
- Buzzer in cell is left unanswered for a long time causing extra anxiety to us

What are your experiences of eye care?

- One person got to see an optician quickly but only when he complained about severe headaches – you have to explain what the consequences are and make a fuss, then it gets sorted
- You wait ages to see an optician; I came to prison without my glasses and could not read or watch TV, borrowed cell mate's glasses (wrong prescription) and had to wait five weeks for eye test
- Eye tests aren't happening

What are your experiences of food?

- It's terrible, I buy my own
- You have to know what to pick, you have five choices but they often run out
- Sometimes there's not enough; portions are too small
- There are vegetarian and halal options, some people said these were better; others stated sometimes these were the only options and they didn't want to have to eat food killed in a certain way
- Fruit on the menu every day but not enough vegetables
- Food is generally bland, cold, under/overcooked – not enough care taken in prep
- Stale bread in the sandwiches at the weekend and fatty bacon
- Not enough sustenance in the food
- Some food is okay – Sunday dinner is the best meal
- You can buy a kettle and make your own drinks if no kettle flasks are available but the tea is cold by the next morning

- You can buy food but only if you have the money and it's not great
- One person stated that the food here was better than in other prisons
- Halal food is better than standard prison catering
- Diet is really poor – no fresh fruit; we need less choice and better quality
- The kitchen caters for all – vegan, vegetarian, kosher, etc. good
- None of the staff check to ensure prisoners are eating
- Difficulty in getting a tea pack for new prisoners
- Need less choice and better quality; can go to canteen once a week but need to pay
- Need health checks (weight management, blood pressure, etc.) when entering prison but this not done so no monitoring
- Did talk to me about health when I moved and told help was viable but not in reality

What are your experiences of access to exercise?

- Only half an hour per day outside – not enough
- Workers get access to the gym four times a week; for them exercise wasn't an issue – more access to fresh air
- Some would like more access to the gym – the gym is good
- You only get to the gym if you work or are over 40
- Fixed weights to be fitted in exercise yard soon - this is welcomed
- One inmate asked for Vitamin D due to lack of sunlight; he was told that he would have to buy this himself (not on prescription) – why is this?

What are your experiences of dental services

- One person saw the dentist – they started working on his teeth without first taking a history
- Big waiting list – however, when an emergency occurred someone was taken straight to the dentist
- They are butchers!
- The prison dentist said treatment was needed when the person's own dentist had told him several weeks earlier that it wasn't required – hospital dentist just out to make money
- Dental service is a local dentist who comes into prison one day per month; you have to make appointment
- One new prisoner unaware there was a dental service
- Dental records are not sought to gather historical dental notes

If one thing could be changed or improved in the prison what would it be?

Our final question was addressed to everyone individually; these were the most important issues raised by inmates:

- Smoking facilities are needed on F wing; it is not acceptable to make prisoners go 'cold turkey'
- Staff too busy to help or talk to prisoners
- Prisoners kept locked up for too long
- Greater support from mental health team needed
- Access to medication and GP referrals need to be quicker
- More exercise
- Better diet (fruit, vegetables, etc.)

Summary of key findings

Our research was a first step in understanding the views and experiences of some prisoners' experiences of HMP Durham. It provides insight into the perspective of people within the prison system. It also draws attention to areas where there is cause for further investigation and shows where future work could be focussed. In particular the following areas warrant additional exploration and discussion:

1. Mental health services
2. Food and nutrition
3. Exercise
4. More timely referrals to GP/mental health services
5. Delays in getting access to prescribed medication

The focus groups prompted queries about the system and services offered by the prison health service. Discussions revealed that first-time prisoners in particular have difficulty in finding information about health and support services. Some respondents said they were not confident that they knew what services were available to them.

On a positive note many prisoners were satisfied with the help and support they received from the DART team, stating that help was effective and timely. The general support received from nursing staff was also seen to be positive.

Some members of the focus groups expressed an interest in contributing again to research and we would be happy to support any further work in this area.

Suggestions and recommendations

The following should be considered and could be used to form the basis of future strategic development and service improvement.

1. Increase engagement activity to ensure newly arrived prisoners in F wing are fully aware of services available to them
2. Recruit more peer support workers to help new prisoners settle into prison life
3. Deliver an effective communication campaign to improve the flow of information about services and support available
4. Work in partnership with proven outside agencies to improve a new prisoner's introduction to the criminal justice system

Conclusion

Our pilot project allowed us to:

- Promote meaningful engagement with prisoners and identify gaps in service and/or failings in communications
- Identify barriers to access services and continuity of care
- Share and highlight/promote best practice

By holding open and frank discussions we can help prisoners become more health aware and look at ways to promote preventive health and wellbeing campaigns to prisoners to help improve their health.

In the long-term this could lead to a reduction in complaints and an overall greater sense of satisfaction in the health services received by prisoners during their prison stay.

Next steps

We are happy to meet with you to discuss this report in more detail and consider further ways of improving the services received by prisoners at HMP Durham.

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