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A pilot evaluation of using symbol-based information in police custody

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Accessible summary

- Many people who commit crimes in the UK have learning difficulties or disabilities.
- The police give people information to read in custody but this information can be confusing.
- This project presented this information in an easier-to-read way using symbols and simple words.
- We asked different people what they thought of the information and most views were very positive.

Summary

At least 20-30% of offenders within the Criminal Justice System (CJS) have learning disabilities or difficulties. This creates significant challenges in relation to meeting their information needs about rights, entitlements, processes and procedures. We report a pilot project where Widgit Symbols were used to create more accessible information about rights and entitlements for people entering custody. The Widgit Symbol custody sheets were used in two Hampshire Constabulary custody centres for a 4-week period and feedback gathered from 14 custody officers and inspectors. The views of 27 other important stakeholders, including young people with autism and their families, Appropriate Adults, and senior personnel within the CJS, were gathered about the sheets through interviews and focus groups. The reaction to the sheets was overwhelmingly positive with many participants suggesting that symbol-based information in custody could be rolled out nationally, and also extended more widely to include other parts of the CJS.

Key words: Criminal Justice System; Custody; Widgit Symbols; Autism; rights and entitlements; accessibility

Background

It is estimated that 20-30% of all offenders in the UK ‘...have learning difficulties or learning disabilities that interfere with their ability to cope within the criminal justice system [CJS]; of this group 7% will have very low IQs of less than 70’ (Jacobson, 2008; p. iii). Offenders with learning disabilities report high levels of bullying and abuse (Talbot, 2010), and 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). Lord Bradley (2009) conducted a review of people with mental health problems or learning difficulties in the CJS and concluded that police and custody officers lacked skills and awareness in identifying such offenders and, therefore, required more training in these areas. In addition, Bradley (2009) suggested there needed to be greater consistency in the treatment of offenders with learning difficulties within the CJS.

There are many suggestions for ways in which the CJS can improve its response to, and support for, people with learning difficulties and disabilities (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. 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). Therefore, custody officers have been suggested as needing skills and awareness to enable them to identify and provide effective support for the range of people who come into custody (Jacobson, 2008). 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 (Hellenbach, 2012).

The current project

A pilot project was carried out in Hampshire to explore the feasibility and acceptability of using a more accessible ‘rights and entitlements’ information sheet presented in a symbol-based format (hereafter, the Widgit Symbol custody sheets). All those arriving in custody must receive a rights and entitlements notice as required by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984 (see Figure 1a). There is also a Home Office ‘Easy Read’ version of the rights and entitlements information that uses simple words and pictures, which should be made available if required (Home Office, 2012). However, this document is 33 pages long (compared to the standard leaflet which is one double-sided page of A4, that folds into a smaller document) and so the extent to which it may be easily read is questionable.

Other documents within the CJS have also been produced in Easy Read format (see <http://www.keyring.org/cjs-easyreadexamples>; also Factsheet 8 from NOMS, 2014), but few have included symbol-based information. Evaluations of at least some of these materials were said to be underway (Poynter, 2011), but we could not find any peer-reviewed published information about the outcome of these evaluations, though there are personal accounts of the positive effects of using Easy Read materials available (<http://www.keyring.org/cjs-easyread-feedback>).

Whether to use a symbol-based or Easy Read format for producing more accessible information is not a decision that can be easily resolved by the current research literature. Detheridge and Detheridge (2013) provide many examples of Widgit symbols being used to support individuals to access information, education and advocacy, but also note that such use is not based on research evidence. Of the limited research that is available there are contrasting findings, with some benefits for comprehension reported in a study comparing symbolised to non-symbolised passages (Jones, Long and Finlay, 2007), but no overall benefit reported by others (Poncelas and Murphy, 2007). Research on Easy Read formats is similarly mixed (Hurtado et al., 2014; Fajardo et al., 2014). In the absence of clear evidence about the relative effectiveness of different accessible formats for improving comprehension

for people with learning difficulties and disabilities, we agree with Rodgers and Namaganda (2005) who argue that:

‘...where no published research exists to tackle a problem, it is worthwhile reporting suggestions of techniques devised by people with relevant experience’ (p.54).

This pilot project, therefore, aimed to find out:

- In what ways do the Widgit symbol custody sheets influence the communication and engagement with individuals in custody, from the perspective of the police officers?
- What are the views of relevant stakeholders about the Widgit symbol custody sheets?
‘Relevant stakeholders’ were: people on the autism spectrum and their families; Appropriate Adults; senior personnel within the criminal justice system; and the custody officers involved in the pilot.

Development of the Widgit Symbol Custody Sheets

Recognising the value and importance of personal experience, this present evaluation reflects the ideas and vision of individuals working in the CJS and with people on the autism spectrum and their families in Hampshire. Specifically, the idea for 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 in developing a custody sheet to support her client base; the Home Office Easy Read version was either not being used in practice or not felt to be appropriate for meeting the information needs of people entering custody. As one of the groups of offenders with learning difficulties, individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are often described as being particularly vulnerable within the CJS (e.g. Chown, 2010; Paterson, 2008) due to ‘predisposing features’ (King & Murphy, 2014; p.2717). There is no unequivocal evidence to suggest that individuals with ASD are overrepresented within the CJS (King & Murphy, 2014; Allen et al., 2008), but they may find the context and procedures particularly difficult to understand and manage (Allen et al., 2007).

Autism Hampshire was already working in partnership with Hampshire Constabulary on providing autism awareness training for frontline personnel, with more than 3000 officers trained since 2008. Both organisations agreed that the development and implementation of more accessible information in custody would augment this training and extend existing custody practices in the way that the Bradley report (2009) had envisaged. A working group comprising members from Autism Hampshire, Hampshire Constabulary (including custody personnel), and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Hampshire was established to develop the accessible information, and the company Widgit Software approached to design and support this work. This group initially developed a series of 15 individual A4 colour leaflets conveying essential information about custody (Know your rights; Making a phone call; What happens in custody); specific processes that may take place while in custody (Booking in; Fingerprints; Forensic examination; Strip search; Your DNA); and other helpful information (People working in custody; Interview phrases; If you are ill; The nurse; Your property; Health questions; Waiting). These leaflets had not been used in custody or evaluated outside the working group.

The research team was approached to conduct an independent evaluation of the Widgit Symbol sheets. Meetings were held with the working group as well as other senior members of Hampshire Constabulary to establish when and how the pilot implementation of the sheets would take place (i.e. which custody centres would be involved, the timing of when the sheets would be used). Initial meetings with the Custody Inspectors at the identified custody centres were arranged with the research team to discuss practicalities and feasibility of using the sheets in custody. These very helpful discussions led to a revised presentation of the sheets; with a black and white folded format of the rights and entitlements leaflet being produced as a Widgit version, with symbols and shorter sentences (see Figure 1). This leaflet was based on the essential information that people in custody need to know according to PACE 1984 and designed to look similar in format (black and white, folded) as the standard rights and entitlements leaflet. The content of this leaflet was checked and approved by Hampshire Constabulary's PACE adviser prior to implementation and includes the statutory

rights on the front and second pages, followed by sections on having a Solicitor; Codes of Practice; How you should be treated in the police station; Time; Interview; Support; Independent Custody Visitor; Breath test; Mental Health Act; and Complaints. In addition, during the initial feasibility visits custody personnel suggested that having the extra Widgit leaflets (If you are ill; Your DNA etc.) available in a folder as laminated A4 sheets would be helpful because these could then be used based on individual needs, possibly later in the custody process once the booking-in was completed.

Insert Figure 1 about here

It was also agreed with the Custody Inspectors that the Widgit sheets would be given out at the booking-in stage of the custody process at the discretion of officers rather than given to everyone entering custody. As this was a new and untested innovation in custody, and we wanted to explore the acceptability and appropriateness of the sheets from the perspectives of custody personnel, it was felt that a non-mandated approach would be more feasible initially. Although developed with the needs of people with ASDs in mind, the potential for symbol-based materials to be useful for anyone who may struggle with literacy, perhaps because they have a learning difficulty or disability; English as an additional language; impaired cognition due to drugs or alcohol; or mental health difficulties was identified. Therefore, a briefing sheet for custody teams was developed by the research team, and checked and approved by the Custody Inspectors, for informing custody personnel about their role in the pilot study (Appendix 1). Communication to custody teams, alongside the briefing sheet, made it clear that the Widgit sheets would be used for a 4-week period in the custody centres anyway but that officers were not obliged to take part in the research i.e. discussing their views about the sheets with the researcher.

Methodology of the pilot implementation

We took a qualitative approach to answering our main research questions through (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 of key

stakeholders about the Widgit Symbol custody sheets through individual interviews and focus groups. Relevant permissions and approvals were obtained from the University of Southampton Research Ethics Committee (Ref # 11930), and the Hampshire Criminal Justice Group. Additionally, a meeting of nineteen representatives of the CJS at the Central Family Court in London viewed and discussed the materials and agreed they were useful, appropriate and accurate for use with vulnerable detainees.

(1) Pilot implementation of the sheets in custody centres

Briefing of the teams: information about the pilot was communicated to all teams initially by the custody Inspectors and then through the custody Sergeants via personal communication as well as the briefing sheet (Appendix 1). The briefing sheet asks custody personnel to give the Widgit version of the rights and entitlements leaflet to ‘...anyone who you think may be vulnerable or have difficulties communicating and understanding’. Additionally, as noted above, the additional Widgit symbol sheets were laminated and provided in a separate folder to be used as needed. Hard copies of the folded Widgit Symbol rights and entitlement leaflets were made available across all shifts and custody personnel were asked to use their discretion in deciding to whom to give them in addition to the ‘standard’ rights and entitlements document (Figure 1a &b).

Recruitment of custody personnel for interview: at the end of the 4-week pilot implementation, the Custody Inspectors and personnel who had taken part in the pilot were approached by the research team, over a period of 3 weeks, and asked if they were willing to take part in a short interview to discuss their views and experiences about using the Widgit sheets. All personnel were provided with an information sheet about the research which emphasised the voluntariness of meeting with the researcher, as well as their rights to withdrawal and confidentiality. If they agreed to participate, custody personnel were also asked to sign a consent form and a time was arranged when the interview could take place.

Interview questions with custody personnel: semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 custody personnel (including Inspectors and Sergeants) to provide their feedback about the Widgit Symbol sheets. The interview questions are included as Appendix 2 and focused on: views about meeting the information needs of young people / vulnerable adults in custody; the pros and cons of using the Widgit Symbol sheets in custody; and whether / how the sheets could be developed and used in the future. In each case custody staff had opportunities to expand on their experiences and views based on their role in booking in detainees. All interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. The Custody Inspectors also completed individual pro formas summarising key information (age, gender, ethnicity, reasons for using the Widgit version) about those who were given the sheets during the pilot period.

(2) Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders

Recruitment of stakeholders: the project partners provided initial contacts for each of the stakeholder groups and we also pursued a snowball sampling strategy from existing and emerging contacts. Some participants had direct experience of the CJS either as part of their job or because they had come into contact with the police. Others had no experience of the CJS but were included as interested community members who were willing to comment on the initiative. Most participants were contacted via email and the practicalities of meeting with them were arranged (face-to-face as a small group or individually, or via the telephone, or Skype). All interviews / focus groups were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. All participants were provided with information about the project in advance via project information sheets, including in a more accessible format where appropriate, and asked to sign a consent form. Where young people were involved, a parent or carer provided informed consent for their participation, and the young people provided their verbal and written assent to take part.

Interview / focus-group questions with stakeholders: different methods were used with different stakeholders, partly depending on pragmatics (maximising involvement over a short period of time) and partly dependent on personal preferences (some were happy to meet together while others preferred individual interviews and, in many cases, individual interviews were easier to arrange because we needed to fit around participants' busy schedules). Some specific questions differed across the stakeholder groups (as would be expected given their different experiences of the CJS) and whether participation took place via interview or focus group. Space precludes the inclusion of all interview schedules and focus group agendas but the interview schedule for senior professionals is included as Appendix 3, and the focus groups agenda for young people with autism and their families is included as Appendix 4 to illustrate the main lines of questioning. These focused on views about the acceptability and appropriateness of the Widgit Symbol leaflet compared to other versions, as well as how the information needs of vulnerable individuals can be best met within the CJS. As part of the interviews and focus groups participants were given copies of the Widgit Symbol rights and entitlements leaflet to look at alongside the standard and the Home Office Easy Read versions.

Participants

In total, 41 people took part in the study; 29 via individual interviews and 12 in small focus groups. This number comprised 14 custody personnel involved in the pilot implementation; three parents and three young people on the autism spectrum (aged 13-14); one young person (aged 17) 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 (one family barrister, two solicitors, two managers from the YOT, one manager for a magistrate's court, and one magistrate). These groups are summarised in Table 1 according to whether their involvement was part of a focus group or via an interview, and whether they had direct experience of the CJS.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis of qualitative data

The qualitative analysis followed a set of logical procedures to enable the researchers to identify key themes and record consistencies and differences between the participants (Newton Suter, 2012). Each audio-file was listened to several times and detailed notes and transcripts made. The answers to the questions were compared across the groups and transcripts and audio-files re-visited to identify emerging themes, which are reported below.

Findings

This section is presented in four main parts: (1) the data summarising to whom the Widgit custody sheets were given; (2) the main themes from the custody personnel about using the sheets in practice; (3) views from stakeholders with direct experiences of the CJS; and (4) views of stakeholders with no direct experiences of the CJS.

(1) Number of Widgit sheets used in custody

During the pilot period, 712 people were recorded as entering custody across the two centres and 27 (3.8%) completed pro formas were returned summarising brief details about to whom the Widgit Symbol leaflets were given. Four were female and 23 were male, aged between 13-66 years, with eight being aged under 18 years; the majority (n=25) were of White British ethnic origin. Three people were also given additional laminated sheets to read from the folder, relating to health issues (not specified). Reasons provided for why the Widgit Symbol sheet had been given included: being a juvenile; (in two cases) having Asperger Syndrome or autism alongside other difficulties (e.g. suicidal tendencies; ADHD); and more commonly, depression and self-harm, other mental health difficulties, substance abuse, and dyslexia / difficulties reading and writing. Two of the detainees were reported as saying that the Widgit leaflet was good and 'better than the standard issue'; however, it was also noted that one detainee said the 'pictures don't really explain his rights'.

(2) Views of the custody officers involved in the pilot

Augmenting and strengthening existing practices

The attitudes of custody personnel towards the Widgit Symbol sheets were mostly very positive. Staff could see the potential for having the Widgit Symbol leaflets as ‘...a *practical and useful bit of kit to complement what [we] are already doing*’. The sheets were seen as useful for intervening early in the custody process, so that a professional and comprehensive service could be provided for meeting individual needs:

‘...whatever we can have to spot those risks and deal with them at the earliest possible stage, particularly people who are vulnerable ... age, illness, learning abilities, health...’

‘I would like to think it would make them feel as though we have their welfare and their interests at heart... I think it would have a positive influence...’

Supporting individual needs and engagement

Relatedly, the most frequently discussed theme to emerge from the interviews was the value of the sheets in potentially improving understanding and engagement with essential information and, as a result, preventing escalation of incidents or supporting a better relationship between the detained person and the custody staff. For example, using the Widgit symbol custody sheet might lead to the detained person being able to:

‘...engage with us far more, be more open and we can... prevent something unpleasant happening...They might take a bad turn or have an episode ... they might have a psychosis episode, whatever else.’

However, it was also noted that while supplying information using Widgit symbols was helpful it did not negate the need for effective verbal interaction and the involvement of an

Appropriate Adult (AA) to support the detained person; specifically, the sheets were suggested to offer useful assistance in the period when waiting for an AA to arrive: *'...to give them some reassurance until someone is there as an AA that can explain things a bit more to them.'*

The value of doing things differently

Custody staff communicated what they saw as perceived value in the novelty of the Widgit symbol sheet compared to the standard rights and entitlements leaflet for drawing the attention of the detained person to important information, for example one interviewee reported the detained person said: *'...oh yeah that's alright, it's something different I'll have a look at that'*. Another custody officer described a similar experience:

'I have used them for every juvenile that's come in and it's really made a difference...they've picked up and started reading and actually taken them away with them... it's a new leaflet and it's obviously more appealing than the bog standard rights that we give out which most people disregard.'

There were various characteristics of the Widgit Symbol sheets that all fourteen of the custody personnel described as potentially supporting the suggested improved engagement and understanding of the rights and entitlements information, such as being: *'friendlier'*, *'simple English'*, *'easier, it's more direct, to the point'*, *'[providing] a bit more clarity'*, *'more user friendly'*, *'quite succinct, an easy read'*, *'a lot more straightforward'*, *'reassuring'*, *'clearer'*. Custody personnel liked the visual nature of the sheets and suggested that the illustrations could help to:

- *'alleviate...fear and confusion'*
- *'give them that time just to look at the pictures and give them a prompt as to this is what it's about'*
- *'help people who are not so well educated to understand what they are entitled to.'*

Consistency across people and contexts

The accessibility of the symbol format was also thought by some to be advantageous for a wide range of people who might come into custody, and for presenting information about different parts of the custody process:

'there is a big spectrum of learning disabilities and a big proportion of people we deal with are vulnerable to some extent socially or through a poor education and those sort of factors and I think it could be an assistance for a lot of people to some extent...'

Likewise, there was wide support from respondents about for the need for consistency across people and contexts in the use of a particular format for accessible information; that is, for a universal approach whereby the sheets could be used for everyone coming into custody and in all custody centres, as well in the courts and other contexts / stages of the CJS, for example:

'...[this could] go all the way through...from the police station, through the magistrates court, potentially probation, witness services...to explain the different steps at each different kind of stage, may be even to defence solicitors and prosecution who deal with witnesses.'

Some reservations about taking a universal approach

However, there were also some reservations expressed from a small number of personnel about the use of sheets, mostly relating to the appropriateness of giving the sheets to all those coming into custody and how to make sensitive decisions about this '*...as a tool I do think it's beneficial although I don't see it as something you would use often*'. For example, one officer described how difficult this decision-making is because there are:

'... those dilemma ones which you think there may be something but you can't be sure and the person hasn't disclosed which makes it very, very difficult... and a lot of the time a lot of those disabilities are hidden'

A couple of officers raised some concerns about whether giving the Widgit sheet to everyone might be antagonistic or unhelpful, while also acknowledging that the sheets would be useful for some:

'...for some people, it would be very beneficial ... the wrong person might see you know, I'm not a child type thing...because people sometimes come in slightly anti-police anyway, they're not particularly pleased by the situation they are in and that might just sort of aggravate them even more if it was the wrong person'

(3) Views from stakeholders with direct experience of the CJS

Participants with direct experiences of the CJS (the CJS professionals, Appropriate Adults, and the young person and two support workers from the YOT), were also mainly very positive in support of trying to do something different and to improve the current situation regarding information provision in custody. Similar themes to those identified by the custody personnel were reflected in discussions. For example:

Supporting individual needs and engagement

'[it is] a very positive step in the right direction... I think the idea is great... Just because someone has been through the system six or seven times doesn't mean they understand it.' [Manager within the CJS].

' [it can be] quite scary for someone in a cell to say "excuse me I don't understand this"... I think it's really good...[it] could be really stabilising.' [Appropriate Adult]

In addition, while two interviewees were positive overall about the sheets they also emphasised the importance of ensuring that detainees still understand the process and that custody personnel are not tempted to assume that this understanding can solely be conveyed or supported via the symbol-based sheet.

The value of doing things differently

Although only based on one person who had been in custody it was interesting that the views of the young offender aligned with those of some of the custody officers about how a novel presentation can capture the attention of detainees:

‘...yeah it’s better than all these, it’s just quick and simple and it gives you all the basics doesn’t it ... I’d want to know what it is... it’d be different and I’d be like, oh yeah, I’ll have a look at this see what it’s like... then I’d read it and get me head down... yeah it is quite helpful, if I’d had this when I first got arrested...’ [young offender]

Consistency across people and contexts

Views were more varied in relation to whether the Widgit sheets should be given at the discretion of the custody sergeant or whether the leaflet should be given to everyone entering custody, although a majority supported wider use of the sheets, for example:

‘I think something like that would be helpful to the vast majority of people who come into custody... as long as it’s clear that they are not an exhaustive answer to everything...’ [Solicitor]

‘...the Widgit symbols are consistent so when you see a symbol for a solicitor it’s the same symbol all the way through which I have to say I think is preferable...’

[Appropriate Adult]

Some reservations about taking a universal approach

However, as with the custody personnel, some of the respondents with direct experiences of the CJS (albeit a minority) were less sure about the usefulness of the Widgit sheets in a custody context, for example:

'I don't know how many people that would actually work for... if it was me in custody I wouldn't understand them... if people already come across these then for people to have them in custody, yes, that would be brilliant... if they've not seen it before it's not really, some of it is clear...' [Appropriate Adult]

(4) Views from stakeholders with no direct experience of the CJS

For those participants with no direct experiences of the CJS (the young people on the autism spectrum and their families, and the couple with learning disabilities), the main messages about the potential value and appropriateness of the Widgit Symbol sheets were again very positive and followed similar themes as the previous two groups.

The value of doing things differently

Parents of young people with autism suggested that the Widgit Symbol sheets were better because the pictures are straightforward, there's less information (and so this is less confusing), and it's less intimidating because it's not such a thick document. Comments from the young people on the autism spectrum made similar points (expressed independently of parents):

'I like the layout of it [the Widgit sheet] and it's just nice and small isn't it? And it's simple, and it is just like straight to the point of it instead of like tons of stuff ... [the Home Office Easy Read version] looks like serious and rubbish.'

'I think it's good because you feel like you've got a lot less to read when you're handed this [the Widgit Symbol leaflet], extremely light compared to this [the Home Office Easy Read version].'

The Widgit version of the leaflet was also preferred by the couple with learning disabilities, compared to the Home Office Easy Read version:

'I'd feel intimidated by all of that writing [on the Home Office Easy Read version] and having to sit there and read it all when you're stressed and you're upset and you don't know what's going on... where the one with the symbols is more, I could understand it straight away and I'd know what was going on....'

Consistency across people and contexts

In line with comments from other participants with experience of the CJS, interviewees generally expressed the view that the sheets would be of value for most people coming into custody, while also noting some limitations, for example:

'Absolutely brilliant without a doubt, should have been done years ago something like this ... it's so visually stimulating for a child, young adult to see these they would know exactly what's happening...The only thing is if you've got a stroppy teenager that was obviously ADHD, you know on the spectrum would think it's a bit babyish but I think when it came down to it, if they were very stressed they would want that without a doubt.' [parent of a young person with ASD]

Discussion

Given the importance of staff attitudes towards implementing any changes to practices (Chown, 2010; Bradley, 2009), and the difficulties of gaining the views of individuals in custody (Allen et al., 2008), this project sought to focus primarily on eliciting the attitudes of

a range of stakeholders about their views on the accessibility, appropriateness and usability of the Widgit Symbol custody sheets. 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. Custody personnel felt that the Widgit sheets had benefits both for the person coming into custody, as well as for the custody teams and others involved in supporting the detained person e.g. Appropriate Adults, health professionals.

In relation to the person coming into custody, custody personnel mostly felt that the Widgit Symbol leaflets could have a place within standard procedures and practices as a helpful tool to explain jargon in order to support the detained person with their understanding of their rights. In relation to the benefits for custody teams, the main view expressed was that having the sheets as one of the tools available for personnel within custody centres, would enable the police to provide a professional and robust service, where individual needs were appropriately taken into account. Moreover, 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 (cf. Bradley, 2009). Overall, given that staff attitudes towards any new initiative or suggested change are vital for any initiative to work (e.g. Fullan, 2007), such positive views provide a very encouraging basis for further developing and implementing this approach.

Some interviewees discussed 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. Indeed, the (admittedly limited) evidence on the presentation of information in different formats for people with learning disabilities suggests that a combination of text + symbols + speech might be the most effective combination for supporting comprehension (Zentel, Opfermann & Krewinkel, 2007). If the initiative is rolled out more widely, the role of the Appropriate Adults should be emphasised as a vital part of the process for helping people to understand what is happening to them in custody.

Moreover, the sheets could play a supportive role in the work of the liaison and diversion services, who are supporting more mental health nurses and other professionals working within the CJS to identify and support the needs of offenders as early as possible (Department of Health / Home Office, 2014).

As with any implementation or intervention, there were also some reservations expressed by a minority of participants, mostly relating to concerns about undermining a respectful relationship with the detained person because they may feel that the symbol-based information is insulting. Certainly, the research literature (although limited) suggests that symbol-based information may only be useful for those who have some previous experience of using symbol-based systems (Poncelas and Murphy, 2007) and so it is likely that not all those with learning difficulties or disabilities, or who may be considered vulnerable in some way, would be able to better understand the symbol-based materials (compared to the 'standard' version). Nevertheless, the fact that there is simplified text to accompany the symbols and that many participants felt that the Widgit Symbol version of the rights and entitlements leaflet was friendlier, more succinct and straightforward, suggests that there could be an important role to play for more accessible information of this kind in custody.

The 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 learning difficulties in the CJS (20-30%; Jacobsen, 2008). It was agreed that the use of the Widgit Symbol sheets would be discretionary during the project and this was important for establishing initial acceptance of the idea. However, in line with discussions in the literature (HMIP, 2014; Chown, 2010; Bradley, 2009) many participants emphasised that it can be very difficult to identify people with disabilities coming into custody and this may explain the low number that were given to people during the pilot. Consequently, if the initiative is extended in the future we would argue that the use of the sheets should become a standard, universal part of the booking-in process in custody in line

with a more inclusive approach to supporting individual needs (e.g. Taket et al., 2013). This suggestion has support from the project participants; a majority of those interviewed suggested that the Widgit Symbol sheets could be used for many people with different needs and that they did not foresee problems in giving the sheets to everyone entering custody.

Limitations and future research

This pilot project was small-scale and focused on the perceptions of a range of stakeholders both within and outside the CJS. Offenders' views were not sought during the pilot implementation and the interactions between custody personnel and detainees were not observed. 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 and this, of course, is a limitation of the present approach and something that would need to be investigated directly in the future. There was some suggestion from two of the detainees who received the sheets that they appreciated the accessible format, although one detained person said that the symbols did not really explain his rights. Clearly, there is a need to conduct a more in-depth investigation to explore the responses of those in custody to the use of the sheets.

One possibility would be to seek feedback from defendants / people in prison and / or in regular contact with the YOT, who have already experienced the processes of the CJS, and ask them to judge the usefulness of the revised information. Another possibility would be to mandate the use of the sheets for all people entering custody over a longer period of time, observe their behaviours and responses, and to work with Appropriate Adults and / or liaison and diversion services to implement the sheets with detainees more regularly. The decision about whether or not to use the Widgit sheets more widely lies with Hampshire Constabulary and we know there is an aspiration to do so; certainly, the positive responses to this pilot study have provided encouragement for such an initiative.

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Figures



Fig 1a: Standard rights and entitlements leaflet

Fig 1b: Widgit Symbol rights and entitlements leaflet [reproduced with permission from Widgit Software]

Tables

Table 1: summary of study participants according to method of involvement

	Study participants	Method of involvement
With direct experience of the CJS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 Custody Personnel • 2 people involved in the Magistrate service • 1 Family Court Barrister • 2 Managers within the Youth Offending Team • 2 Defence solicitors • 4 people working in the Appropriate Adult Service • 1 legal Representative 	Individual interviews (face-to-face; Skype; telephone) (n=26)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1: 3 people who work for The Appropriate Adult Service • Group 2: 2 staff who work for the Youth Offending Team and 1 young offender 	Focus group (n=6)
Without direct experience of the CJS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 parent of a young person with learning disabilities 	Individual interview (face-to-face) (n=1)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 people with learning disabilities 	Couple interview (face-to-face) (n=2)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1: 3 young people diagnosed with ASD plus 3 of their parents (two Mums and one Dad) <p>Note that for some of this session the young people and parents discussed their views in separate groups; at the end of the session the parents and young people came back together to share their views (see Appendix 4 for focus group agenda).</p>	Focus group (n=6)
		Total n = 41

Appendix 1: briefing sheet for custody teams (with contact details anonymised)

The Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet Pilot Project Briefing sheet

<p>What is this pilot project?</p>	<p>Information given to people in custody can be difficult for some people to understand and this can impact on their access to justice and appropriate services. We are trying out a new way of presenting this information that may be easier to read and understand; this new information is a <i>supplement</i> to the existing 'rights and entitlements' leaflet and not a replacement for it. This supplementary information uses printed sheets of paper with communication symbols and a small amount of words ['Widgit Symbol Custody Sheets']. The research is designed to find out what people think about these new Widgit Symbol Custody Sheets. Thanks for your help with this.</p>
<p>Who is involved in the project?</p>	<p>Autism Hampshire has been working with Widgit (communication specialists) and Hampshire Constabulary to design the information. The University of Southampton are independently evaluating the pilot project.</p>
<p>What are you being asked to do?</p>	<p>Step 1: For four full shift patterns starting from Monday 11th August 2014 please use the 'Summary rights and entitlements Widgit Symbol leaflet' with <u>anyone</u> who you think may be vulnerable or have difficulties communicating and understanding. This could be because they have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a learning disability - a particular condition or difficulty (e.g. autism, ADHD, Asperger Syndrome, personality disorder) - mental health difficulties - not had access to a formal education <p>This is not an exhaustive list; there may be other reasons why detainees might find it difficult to read the standard rights and entitlements leaflet. You should use your discretion about who you think might find the Widgit Symbol sheets useful. You <u>must</u> give out the standard rights and entitlements leaflet as well as the Widgit Symbol version.</p> <p>Step 2: There is additional information available in the Widgit Symbol format that you can use if you think this might be helpful or necessary. This information is provided in the black folder with the Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet cover.</p> <p>Step 3: <u>Every time</u> you use any of the Widgit Symbol custody sheets, please make a note of the date, custody record number, and the sheets used on the Widgit Symbol Custody Sheet log (supplied).</p>
<p>Feedback</p>	<p>The research team at the University would like your feedback about the Widgit Symbol Custody sheets. [They] will visit the custody centre after the pilot to ask whether you are willing to provide feedback. You do not have to do this. If you do, this will be a brief conversation lasting about 20 minutes.</p>
<p>Contact information</p>	<p>This project has the support of Chief Constable XXXXXXXX. At [Custody Centre 1], you should contact XXXXXXXX with any queries. At [Custody Centre 2], you should contact XXXXXXXX You can also contact XXXXXXXX at the University: XXXXXXXX</p>

Appendix 2: Interview questions for custody personnel

Preamble: We are interested in your views about the Widgit Symbol Custody sheets and whether you have used them in the past month. We are particularly interested in hearing your feedback about what you felt worked well and what could have worked better. If we were to roll this out across Hampshire, what kinds of things would you advise?

1. How did you hear about the Widgit Symbol pilot project?
 - From whom?
 - In what way(s) was communication made?

2. Was enough information provided about the pilot for you to use the sheets?
 - clarity of purpose?
 - could this be done better / differently?

3. Thinking about the past month, where and how have you used the Widgit Symbol sheets?
 - with whom?
 - which shift(s)?
 - reasons for doing this?
 - which sheets in particular?

4. What difference, if any, did you think using the Widgit Symbol sheets made?
 - for the detainee?
 - for you? [Prompts re communication and engagement if needed]

5. From a practical point of view, were the sheets:
 - easy to use (available)?
 - in the right format (size of leaflet; too much too little information)?
 - are there ways of doing this better / differently?

6. Is there any information missing that it would be useful to include?

7. Do you think it is likely that you will continue to use the Widgit Symbol forms in custody?

8. Is there anything else about this pilot project that you want to feedback? If we were to roll this out across Hampshire or more widely, what are the important things that we need to take on board?

Appendix 3: Interview schedule for senior professionals

Preamble: we are interested in your experience and views about meeting the information needs of vulnerable adults and young people in custody. We are also interested in your views about the Widgit Symbol sheets and whether you feel these are a helpful addition to the information currently available.

1. Can you tell us about the extent to which your role brings you into contact with vulnerable adults and young people who are in custody?
2. What, if any, particular challenges do you experience in your role in relation to meeting the information needs of vulnerable adults and young people?
3. If you do not experience any direct challenges yourself in this regard, what are your perceptions about how the information needs of vulnerable adults and young people are met within the criminal justice system?
4. What do you perceive or experience as the outcomes of not meeting information needs effectively for vulnerable adults and young people?
5. In what ways can the information needs of vulnerable adults and young people be more effectively met within the criminal justice system?
6. This pilot project has focused on the information that people receive in custody. Autism Hampshire in conjunction with Widgit and Hampshire Constabulary have devised some more accessible information [show examples].
 - What are your initial thoughts about this initiative?
 - Do you see this as potentially meeting the information needs of some people in custody more effectively than at present?
 - Is this something that has the potential to be rolled out more widely?
 - Do you think there are any drawbacks or disadvantages of these formats from the perspective of your role in the justice system?
 - Do you have any advice on how they could be improved?
7. Is there anything else you think we should know about supporting vulnerable adults and young people in the criminal justice system?

Appendix 4: Focus group agenda for young people and families

This is what we will do:

(1) XXXX and XXXX from the University will start by welcoming everyone and explaining the project.

(2) Everyone in the room will say their name and where they work or live.

(3) We will all agree the rules about how to listen to and respect each other.

(4) XXXX and XXXX will split the big group into two smaller groups:

- Group 1 will look at information A and
- Group 2 will look at information B.

(5) Both groups will answer the questions:

- a. What do you like about how the information is presented?
- b. What do you not like about how the information is presented?
- c. Is there a better or different way of presenting the information?

(6) The groups will then swap so that:

- Group 1 will look at information B and
- Group 2 will look at information A.

(7) Both groups will answer the questions:

- a. What do you like about how the information is presented?
- b. What do you not like about how the information is presented?
- c. Is there a better or different way of presenting the information?

(8) Group 1 and Group 2 will come back together to form one big group.

(9) XXXX and XXXX will tell the big group what Group 1 said and what Group 2 said.

(10) Everyone in the group will have a chance to say a final thing about the information they have seen.

(11) XXXX and XXXX will end the discussion and thank everyone for their time.

The session is finished and everyone can go home!