



## Prisoners' perceptions of care and rehabilitation from prison officers trained as Five Minute Interventionists

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The Five Minute Intervention (FMI) project trained prison officers to turn everyday conversations into rehabilitative opportunities using skills such as Socratic questioning, active listening, and affirmation. Webster and Kenny (2015) reported on the experiences of prison officers involved in the FMI pilot. This research reports on the experiences of ten male prisoners who participated in FMI conversations with prison officers. FMI training now forms part of the national training programme for prison staff.

### Key findings

- The prisoners described a number of positive changes that they believed had occurred for them through the FMI conversations, including changes to their thinking skills and self-efficacy.
- They also reported some important reciprocal effects where they advocated on FMI officers' behalf, because they perceived the officers to have shown humanity and caring towards them.
- Although there are some limitations to the study, particularly in terms of how the prisoners were selected, the study indicates that the FMI approach can enable meaningful interactions between prison officers and prisoners, and that FMI conversations can be experienced as desirable by prisoners as well as by staff. The study provides some grounds for further roll-out of FMI, as long as this is supported by continuing evaluation.

**The views expressed in this Analytical Summary are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Ministry of Justice (nor do they reflect Government policy).**

### Background

Public and political expectation of prison is that it will reduce reoffending and provide rehabilitation for those serving prison sentences. However, prison is not always experienced as a supportive environment, and while some may argue that it never can be, others believe that it is possible for a prison to provide rehabilitative experiences through its daily life as well as through structured programmes. For example, Smith and Schweitzer (2012) introduced the notion of “the therapeutic prison” where evidence-based interventions were supported by clearly articulated goals and a range of rehabilitative staff behaviours such as pro-social modelling, reinforcement of new behaviours, skills-building interactions, and open and respectful communication between staff and prisoners.

Interactions between prison officers and prisoners are considered fundamental to effective prison management (Trotter, 1993). Positive staff prisoner interactions are not

only important for daily harmony but are also likely to assist in rehabilitation. Research suggests that it is possible to achieve respectful relationships between prisoners and officers so that officers are not necessarily seen by prisoners as the ‘enemy’ (Crewe, 2005). Furthermore, Dowden and Andrews (2004) have identified what are known as “Core Correctional Skills” – the skills which, when used by corrections staff, are associated with reduced recidivism.

The current study investigated the immediate impact on prisoners of specialised training for frontline prison officers designed to change the nature of their interactions with prisoners. The Five Minute Interventionist (FMI) pilot project selected and trained prison officers in one prison to interact differently with prisoners during everyday conversations. They were trained to turn conversations into opportunities to target manifestations of impulsivity, poor motivation to change, and lack of hope. They were taught skills to encourage personal responsibility and problem-solving such as

active listening, motivational interviewing, Socratic questioning, use of verbal reinforcement, and giving hope. The impact of the FMI training on the small group of staff who piloted the initiative has been reported by Webster and Kenny (2015). The current study was concerned with the way in which prisoners experienced their conversations with FMI-trained staff.

The research questions were:

- 1) How did prisoners perceive their interactions with FMI-trained prison officers?
- 2) What were prisoners' experiences and perspectives of FMI-trained prison officers?

## Approach

The Five Minute Intervention project was piloted on a small scale in HMP & YOI Portland in July to October 2013, so that preliminary examination of its effects could be made before any wider roll-out. Ten officers from five different wings in the prison were trained to use specific rehabilitative skills in their everyday conversations with prisoners. The participants for this study were ten male prisoners identified by the FMI-trained officers as having engaged in FMI conversations. All of the ten participants who were approached consented to take part in the study. This was therefore a targeted sample rather than a random sample; and the study did not compare how prisoners describe their conversations with non-FMI officers. These limitations must be borne in mind when reading the report as there is some risk that the findings will not be representative of all prisoners or that the findings can be fully attributed to the FMI approach.

The study was qualitative and involved interviews following a topic guide. To increase trust in the anonymity of their involvement (a common concern with prison research), participants were not asked for any personal information about, for example, their offending or their sentence as part of the research, so it is not possible to report demographic information about the sample. The topic guide was closely modelled on the approach taken to investigate FMI from the staff perspective (Webster and Kenny, 2015). The interview asked participants to describe a recent conversation with an FMI-trained officer, how they were feeling prior to the conversation, how they felt afterwards, what they wanted from the conversation and what they learnt from the conversation. Interview questions were open-ended and encouraged the exploration of information. Interviews were conducted during the period of the FMI pilot by the first author (at the time working as a psychologist based at the prison concerned) and were recorded using a digital recorder before being transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were analysed using

grounded theory analysis by an independent researcher (the second author) who was unconnected with the FMI project.

## Findings

It was clear from the participants' descriptions of their conversations that the prison officers concerned had been using FMI skills in their interactions. The analysis of the interviews identified three core themes, each with several sub-themes, as described below.

### Impact of FMI Interactions for prisoners

One of the perceived impacts for prisoners of FMI interactions was **emotional diffusion**, where negative feelings could be expressed and alleviated:

*I didn't want to even go to work ...because of the way I was feeling because I felt tense and I thought well... [FMI prison officer] just generally talking to me about the situation, the whole situation. Just talking me through it, you know...well he obviously understands it you know, which...calmed me down quite a lot and made me think about it a lot more in different manner instead of winding myself up*

The emotional availability of the FMI officers and their ability to diffuse negatively charged situations was a recurring theme. Participants felt that FMI officers helped to facilitate change and promote personal growth, both at times of emotional negativity and more generally. FMI officers were perceived as being genuinely interested and this appeared to assist with facilitating change. While participants did not feel all prison officers were genuine, there was a repeatedly expressed belief that FMI officers wanted prisoners to succeed:

*he said "you've achieved them goals" and that, "just carry on doing what you're doing and don't mess about"*

*he's come up to me and said, you know, "you're doing really well all the time, you're doing really well just keep doing what you're doing" um, you know, "you can only make things better for yourself".*

The FMI officers' use of **affirmation** demonstrated to prisoners that their positive behaviour was being recognised by others. This is important because a core aspect of the self-change process is that change is recognised and reflected back and that there is some sort of 'personal voucher' who affirms the change (Maruna, 2004).

The interviews also revealed how interactions with FMI officers promoted **self-reflection** which facilitated change. In the extract below, the prisoner explains how

an FMI conversation assisted him to reflect and recognise that a previous behaviour was not right.

*you see, the way he just says it every word is so powerful. It's like there's a lot of meanings behind what he says, you know, like a poet. It's like poetry innit... That's what it's like, there's different meanings behind ... but the main meaning behind it is just fix up your life innit? That's what it was, yeah, so I'm thinking maybe I want to not be who I was... [It] made me think "okay then innit maybe I went about it the wrong way innit"... [It] actually made me apologise to her which is something I'm not use to doing*

Another theme that recurred throughout the interviews was that of participants **thinking about the future** and where they want to be. Such reflection is an example of the consideration of alternative 'possible selves', where a future-orientated construct of 'self' acts as a road map to guide future behaviour. Prisoners also reported that FMI conversations encouraged **consequential thinking**, seen as helpful in contrast to the experience of prison typically removing the need for independent thought:

*just think about your consequences. Think before you ask stupid questions, before you kick off and with anything, coz when you get out of here you got no one to do things for you. You're on your own. That's what he was trying to put across, weren't it?*

*he'll make me break down the story, and then he'll make me think behind certain parts of that, and then and then he'll make me realise the error of my ways. Like, he makes you feel like the answers are within yourself. You just don't think, coz you're so used to asking people for it.*

However, while there were many positive exchanges with FMI officers, there were also some unintended consequences. For example, for some the repetitive nature of FMI conversations was frustrating:

*he keeps repeating the same conversation every time like I've forgotten it or something.*

### **Personal qualities of FMI officers**

Several core desirable qualities were perceived in conversations with the FMI officers and these qualities were contrasted with conversations with prison officers more generally. The first quality was being **non-judgemental** and congruent. Participants explained that prisoners can see through prison officers who are disingenuous but recognised that their stereotypical views of prison staff were challenged by the FMI officers:

*I just see all screws... I like thought, "prison officer?" I thought "nah, they don't give a \*\*\*\* about no one else". Then he just come in and took his time. I thought "fair*

*play to him" really like. No-one's done that before. I respect him really...he's fair really, he listens and understands*

The second important quality observed in FMI officers was **willingness to help**. Other prison researchers (Hulley, Liebling and Crewe, 2012) have identified the same theme, which they have labelled "Getting things done" – an extremely important indicator of respect in the eyes of prisoners. In the current FMI study, help with problem solving, both on an emotional and practical level, was important for all participants, arising numerous times in the interviews, and this sort of help aided in mediating stress and frustration.

*after I had the conversation I felt a lot more obviously better, because I got it off my chest, Um and then obviously 2 days later ... you know, it was a lot better for me. I felt a lot less stress.*

A third quality observed in FMI officers was a willingness to **listen** and being approachable:

*he listens, he really does actually listen. Whereas, you know, I could go and speak... I think that is why I maybe don't speak to some of the officers in the same way, because I can go to some of the officers and ...you can just see that they really can't be bothered to listen to that, you know. Whereas with [FMI officer] you can see it in his face; he actually he looks at you with eye contact and you know he's actually paying attention*

Analysis of the interviews also suggested that a further key perception was that the FMI prison officers were nurturing and caring. The caring actions of FMI officers created reciprocal relationships, where prisoners became invested in their relationships with the officer:

*he cared. In a way he wanted me to get better and not get all these extra days, all this basic stuff and fighting and he, he don't want that I don't think. He just much rather, um, I could of done better given a chance and someone like trying to listen to me...I thought like he was going to give me a chance and if I proved to him then it... like, not the bond, the bond yeah the bond, in some way would get better*

The spontaneous but then deliberate use of the word "bond" in the extract above suggests the desire to cultivate a relationship beyond a superficial level. This contradicts the assumption that prisoners inevitably mistrust officers and prefer that relationships with staff are kept distant. Indeed, it has been found in other research that close bonds can be developed between prisoners and prison staff (Crawley and Crawley, 2008).

### **Achieving constructive and collaborative prison relationships**

The final core category referred to the relational dynamics which served to build constructive and collaborative prison relationships. One of the key subcategories for this core category was that of **mutual reciprocity** between prisoner and prison staff.

*I won't let another prisoner speak down to [FMI officer] in here. I know if I'm mingling around and he said something to somebody and they haven't done it, I'll normally say "oi, come on, toe the line". You know, "don't take the piss out of [FMI officer] he's a good bloke. He's only it's his job he's just telling you what to do, you know". I sort of guide them and point them in the right direction, you know. [FMI officer] has only got to ask me to do something and I will do...if it just takes a little bit off him then I'll do it because he does a lot for me*

The interviews revealed several such instances where prisoners advocated on behalf of prison staff. This outcome was also reported by the FMI officers themselves (Webster and Kenny, 2015) who felt prisoners showed them more respect after they began using FMI skills in their daily interactions. The participants described mutual and reciprocal relationships in that the prison officer gives support and is responsive to the prisoner's emotional and practical needs and, as a consequence, the prisoner feels invested in the relationship and motivated to respond with supportive effort of his own.

A further important category in building constructive and collaborative relationships was being **treated as a human**, with respect, and for the interaction to not be degrading. This category is conceptually aligned with analysis from previous core categories.

*he actually come open your cell which makes it a lot better. Because when they talk to you outside of the door, like, I never noticed how degrading it felt until he came inside one day and actually sat on my bed and spoke to me about it. And then just made you think okay, like when he left like you felt the problem was gone and I slept better that night I think anyway, and just talking about these things now makes me think okay, like, "he goes out of his way quite a lot".*

This extract also highlights another important component within building collaborative relationships in prison, which is the demonstration of care.

## Conclusions, limitations and implications

The analysis indicated that the prisoners interviewed believed that the FMI had had a considerable impact on them, and they were able to recognise and articulate the ways in which FMI interactions held meaning for them. Participants described a number of psychological

benefits resulting from their interactions with the FMI trained officers. They provided personal descriptions of an increased sense of self-efficacy, improved decision making, self-reflection and consequential thinking, as well as an enhanced sense of autonomy that developed from FMI prison officers encouraging independent thinking and self-questioning. Several of the participants described how interactions with FMI prison officers had led to an increased self-confidence and how reinforcement of positive behaviour had encouraged them to work towards personal change. Training prison officers to engage in brief rehabilitative encounters with prisoners may, therefore, not only improve staff-prisoner relationships but enable staff to step beyond a purely custodial role to one where they provide prisoners with the skills and hope to make positive differences in their lives.

There are several important limitations to this study which must be taken into account. First, participants were selected by FMI officers because it was known they had taken part in FMI conversations, and this is likely to have resulted in a skewed sample with unrepresentatively positive views of prison officers. Furthermore, participants may have been reluctant to disclose negative perceptions of the FMI officers, knowing that the interviewer knew the officers concerned, and so this could have affected the themes identified. They may have felt that they should not report problematic interactions or perceptions of the FMI officers. It is also not possible to say, of course, whether the benefits they reported lasted in the longer term. Lastly, it was also sometimes unclear in the data if it was FMI training that had affected the conversations and personal qualities of the officers or whether these were skills and qualities already practiced by the officer. It may be a combination of both, in that officers possessed some skills which were then enhanced by FMI training.

However, many of the skills and qualities that prisoners identified are those directly taught in the training, such as active listening, Socratic questioning, and affirmation. Secondly, Webster and Kenny's (2015) study of the prison officers involved in this project found that FMI officers' descriptions of their conversations with prisoners changed in numerous ways after FMI training, while non-FMI officers continued to describe their everyday conversations in a way that did not change over time. Hence, it is likely that the FMI training was responsible for at least some of the ways in which prisoners found their conversations with FMI officers to be helpful.

The positive experiences of, and interactions with, FMI prison staff are important as research has found that finding meaning within prison and accepting positive



experiences can help to erode some of a prisoner's negative life experiences and allow for the development of new positive self-identities (see Perrin and Blagden, 2014).

Taken together with the study of prison officers reported by Webster and Kenny (2015), the evidence for the benefits of FMI training with prison officers supports further cautious roll-out of the initiative, as long as this roll-out is supported by continuing evaluation. FMI training has now been extended to a further ten prisons under this condition.

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First published 2017

ISBN 978 1 84099 786 6

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