

# A VIEW FROM BEHIND THE WALLS: A qualitative exploration of user experiences within the Offender Personality Disorder (OPD) pathway

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## BACKGROUND

The Offender Personality Disorder (OPD) pathway represents a shift in criminal justice settings, aiming to balance risk management with therapeutic intervention. While clinical outcomes are often measured through recidivism, there is a relative dearth of research capturing experiential accounts of those receiving treatment.

This study aimed to fill this research gap by exploring:

- 1) How participants currently on the pathway perceive the therapeutic process, and
- 2) What factors they identify as most critical to their progression.

## METHOD

A qualitative approach to data collection was employed, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to access the lived experience of those receiving treatment on the pathway.

Six male participants currently engaged with the OPD pathway in a single custodial setting were interviewed. Interviews explored participants' experiences of the therapeutic process and perceived mechanisms of change.

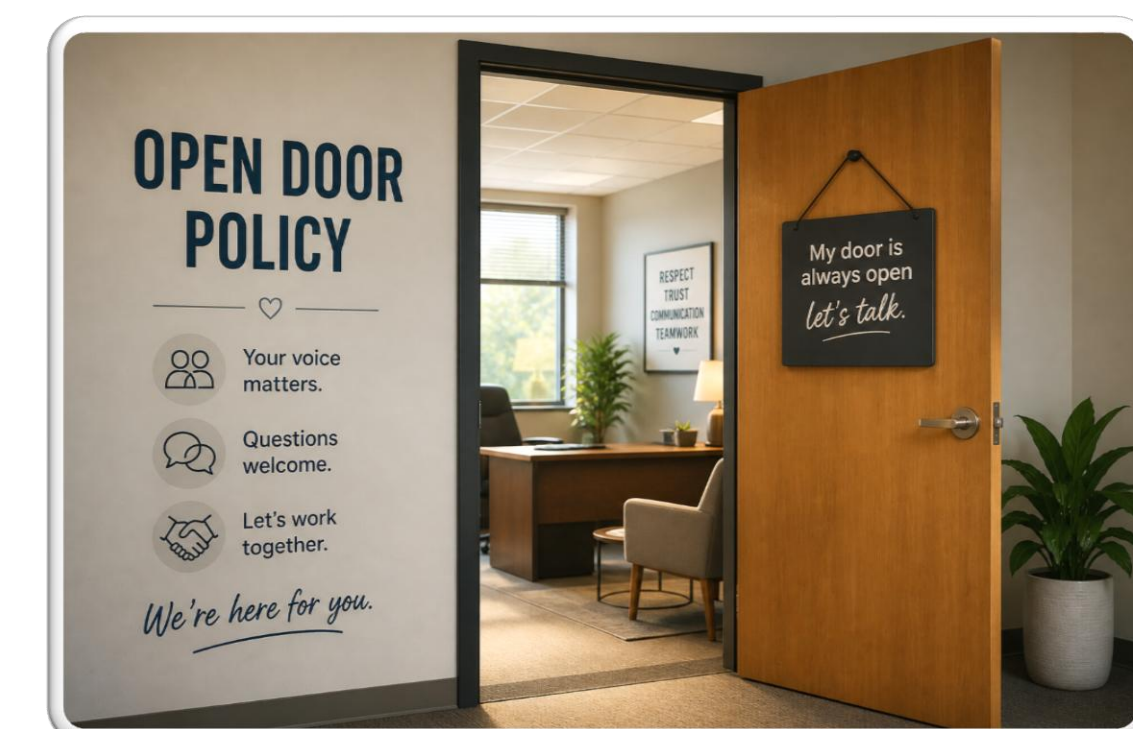
Transcripts were analysed by university academics and a lived experience researcher, using an inductive thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS (themes and representative quotes)

Preliminary analysis suggests that successful engagement in the OPD programme is predicated on foundational relational qualities and an accessible environmental culture. Recurring ideas across the dataset highlighted a tension between walls and notions of 'openness'; experienced through the interconnected domains of environment, staff-user dynamics, and the internal psychological shifts needed to facilitate personal progression. According to participants, positive experiences were mediated by staff understanding; often underpinned by specialist training. These experiences were contrasted with those of dismissal and control within the wider prison environment.

### Reconfiguring institutional walls (Openness in respect of environment)

- "This [was] not setting us up for Cat D, constantly behind our doors." [Participant 1]  
"[Previously], I'd stay in my pad... not shower... withdraw." [Participant 4]  
"Everywhere else... everything's forced... this was completely different than that." [Participant 5]  
"It's like they've got an open doors policy... if you're struggling." [Participant 4]  
"It's knowing that you've got somewhere to go if you're having a bad day." [Participant 6]  
"You can just come and have a chat." [Participant 5]  
"I... drop in all the time, even though I'm signed off now. We still pop in when we're free... because we know it's there. Yeah, it's a tool in your arsenal, isn't it?" [Participant 2]



### Navigating relational walls (Openness in staff-user relations)

- "As soon as I see them [previous staff] looking at their watch... I close off." [Participant 4]  
"They [previous staff] also make you think you're lying." [Participant 6]  
"But those staff that did want to help, they would give you a little bit of themselves." [Participant 1]  
"The first night I come here, my key worker came up to the induction. In the 16 years that I've been on this sentence, nobody's done that." [Participant 4]  
"They genuinely care... they take the time to listen." [Participant 6]  
"When I sit down with my key worker, when I get overtired and I said yeah, I've been fine, I've been fine. And they said, well, when you're saying one thing but your body's saying something different and then I'll start to open up." [Participant 4]

### Dismantling internal walls (Openness to change, and to future possibility)

- "I used to care what people think... had to prove myself." [Participant 6]  
"If you want to change it'll work. If you don't want to change, it ain't going to work... It's got to come from you more than them to be fair, right?" [Participant 1]  
"I've never felt so proud. Because for me somebody turning around and saying you've done all the work, you're showing you're trustworthy." [Participant 4]  
"I've got to a stage where I thought... Yeah, I'm more than capable now. If I need something, I can do it myself. I can ask if I need it rather than struggle." [Participant 1]  
"Well, now I just open up... I don't build anything. I'll speak and I'll get it out. Whether it's good, whether it's bad." [Participant 2]  
"Not reverting back to old ways if I'm struggling with something, or I'm getting frustrated with something. Know where I can go to ask for help." [Participant 1]



- "Other staff... wouldn't know... they just make a decision there and then." [Participant 5]  
"They [untrained staff] don't understand... they think you're just being difficult." [Participant 6]  
"Read up about the person... know their triggers." [Participant 4]  
"These are trained in this... they know what it is." [Participant 5]  
"What's good about the pathway? You've got good staff who have been trained in that field... even if they've not been trained. If you've got a good member of staff, what is willing to listen, I think that's a big thing." [Participant 1]  
"When you went to certain members of staff, you could tell that they were engaging me and wanted to listen to what your problem was." [Participant 1]  
"Because you wouldn't go to the other staff... these are trained in this. It would be a bit harder to go to another member of staff who hasn't had any training." [Participant 2]

...mediated by **staff understanding (and training)**

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that therapeutic change in criminal justice settings is highly dependent on 'relational climate'. And by reducing barriers, the pathway enables those receiving treatment to bridge the gap between psychological understanding and behavioural change. Although the small number of participants and single setting limit transferability of results, these insights have some implications for staff training, service design, and the continuity of care across custodial settings.

**"I just wish that I was on this pathway  
a lot early on in my sentence"**

[Participant 4]

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