

Locked up and Locked out: communication is the key

A report of a conference hosted jointly by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and the Youth Justice Agency to raise awareness of the communication support needs of young offenders within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland

Foreword

In June 2009, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, in partnership with the Youth Justice Agency, hosted a conference at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown to raise awareness of the communication support needs of young offenders within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.

The event brought together expert speakers and professionals involved in the planning and delivery of relevant services and over 80 delegates attended. This conference report seeks to capture the key issues explored during the event and suggests a number of recommendations for improving service provision in Northern Ireland through the establishment of a speech, language and communication needs service.

We are grateful to all those who participated in the conference, especially to the young people who shared their experiences with us.

Alison McCullough MBE
Country Policy Officer Northern Ireland
Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

Dr Bill Lockhart OBE
Chief Executive
Youth Justice Agency

Pictured at the conference are: Rt Hon Paul Goggins MP, Minister of State for Northern Ireland; Alison McCullough, NI Country Policy Officer, RCSLT; Bill Lockhart, Chief Executive, Youth Justice Agency.

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is a registered charity whose patron is HRH The Countess of Wessex. It is the professional body for speech and language therapists and support workers, and aims to promote excellence in practice and influence health, education and social care policies.

There are around 350 practising Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) in Northern Ireland. Speech and language therapists work in a range of Primary, Secondary and Community Care environments. They also work in a variety of educational settings and have an in depth understanding of the challenges facing Health and Education in the coordination of services to children and young people. Speech and Language Therapists also work in courtrooms, prisons and young offenders' institutions and are often the key professionals involved in the support of offenders with Communication Impairment.

About the Youth Justice Agency

The Youth Justice Agency was launched as an Executive Agency of the Northern Ireland Office in April 2003. Its principal aim is to reduce youth crime and build confidence in the youth justice system. The Agency works with children aged 10-17 years old who have offended or are at serious risk of offending, and delivers a range of services including diversionary interventions (through a network of community-based teams), youth conferencing (a restorative process in which victims have a say), and custody for the most serious offenders.





Conference in session

Outcomes and Recommendations

Conference calls for:

1. Partnership building across all agencies.
2. Awareness raising across criminal justice sector.
3. Appropriate screening and assessment: The initial screening process, for all young people entering the criminal justice system, to be amended to identify those with a communication disability to allow them to receive the specialist services that they need.
4. Staff training: Professionals working with young offenders with a communication disability should receive communication skills training, which has been developed by SLTs.
5. Provision of programmes and specialist therapies.
6. Provision of intermediaries within Northern Ireland and reasonable adjustments made for people with communication support needs.
7. Early intervention/integrated approaches to develop and commission a comprehensive speech and language therapy service throughout the criminal justice pathway to meet the needs of young people with a communication disability.
8. Government to fund research into the impact of speech and language therapy on reducing offending.
9. Reduce language complexity in court and related written material. Make court universally accessible by using Plain English.

Conference Report

On 30 June 2009 Paul Goggins, Minister of State for Northern Ireland with responsibility for justice and security, officially opened *Locked up and locked out: communication is the key*, an invitation-only conference held at the University of Ulster. This jointly hosted event by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and the Youth Justice Agency brought together expert speakers and professionals involved in the planning and delivery of relevant services.

Event aims were to:

- Raise awareness of the communication support needs of young offenders in Northern Ireland amongst government, key stakeholders and the profession
- Profile the role of speech and language therapy in meeting the needs of these offenders
- Highlight the gaps in provision of speech and language therapy in the justice system in Northern Ireland
- Inform stakeholders and members of speech and language therapy best practice in service delivery in order to establish a speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) service in Northern Ireland

Why?

Recent reports, such as that of the NI Speech and Language Therapy Task Force and *No One Knows*, from the NI Prison Reform Trust, highlighted a lack of provision in Northern Ireland for young and adult offenders who have SLCN.

What is the problem?

Young offenders have a range of communication difficulties including:

- Language (developmental problems in understanding and using language to communicate)
- Specific developmental syndromes e.g., ADHD/Asperger's syndrome, autistic spectrum disorders
- Communication difficulties associated with mental illness
- Speech (dyspraxia, delay, disorder)
- Hearing impairment
- Dysfluency

The evidence base:

- Over 60% of young people in the criminal justice system have a communication disability and 46-67% of these have poor or very poor skills (Bryan, Freer and Furlong, 2007)
- The association between speech and language disorders and behaviour difficulties is well established (Humber and Snow, 2001). There is very strong evidence from Canada and the USA that speech language and communication difficulties tend to be labelled as 'behaviour' problems
- Low level of speech and language, education and literacy are risk factors for offending (Tomblin, 2000)
- There is a strong correlation between poor educational skills (particularly literacy skills) and criminal behaviour. Improving literacy and social skills is essential to reduce re-offending (Snow and Powell, 2004)
- A third of children with speech and language difficulties later developed mental health problems, with resulting criminal involvement in some cases (Clegg, 1999)

A recent study (Bryan et al 2007) amongst a sample of 58 juveniles showed:

TOTAL - 3 Standardised Scores

Test	Poor or Very Poor %	Below Average %	Total % Below Average
Listening vocabulary	67	23	90
Listening grammar	51	33	84
Speaking vocabulary	62	20	82
Speaking grammar	46	20	66

- Mean age was 17 (15.2 - 18.1)
- 9 had a medical diagnosis (ASD, ADHD)
- 2 had ESL (lower than expected)
- 40 had history of drug and alcohol abuse
- 19 were 'looked after' children
- 5 had statements of SEN (LD)

The findings:

- Offender treatment programmes are largely language based. Communication disability prevents offenders from accessing language based interventions so increases their chances of re-offending
- There is a mismatch between the literacy demands of programmes and skills level of offenders, which is particularly significant with respect to speaking and listening skills (Home Office Findings 233, 2009)
- There is an urgent need to address individual speaking and listening problems (HMSO 2006)
 - How do they communicate?
 - Does this level of language affect verbally mediated interventions?
 - Is this lack of opportunity or difficulty in acquiring skills?

What our speakers said

Dan Gunn, OBE of the Scottish Prison Service and former Governor of Polmont Young Offenders Institution in Stirlingshire:

"Young people with language difficulties, if they do not end up in the criminal justice system will be heavy consumers of NHS services and they will always struggle to fulfil their true potential - to the detriment of society."

Dr Bill Lockhart, OBE, Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Agency:

"The most effective way to reduce or prevent offending is to provide the right level of support at the time it is needed."

Diz Minnitt, Youth Offending Team Manager in Milton Keynes:

"Staff in the Youth Justice System have not had the training to identify or work with speech language and communication needs and ASSET does not currently include a section that would enable staff to accurately identify SLCN or other difficulties that may include a SLCN element."

Professor Karen Bryan, Head of the Division of Health and Social Care University of Surrey:

"We need to capitalise on the unique role played by speech and language therapists as part of the team in addressing young people's needs, changing regimes to be communication friendly and in the training of other staff."

Jane Mackenzie, RCSLT England Country Policy Officer:

"In some areas 40-50% of children enter the education system without sufficient speech and language skills to learn to read and write."

Helen Clarke, Highly Specialised speech and language therapist, Wandsworth PCT:

"Support with all aspects of language is key, because offender treatment programmes are largely, if not completely, language based."

What our delegates said

Barriers facing young offenders with communication difficulties:

- Models of assessment are delivered by people who are unaware of speech, language and communication needs
- Inaccessible written information
- Young people do not know they have a problem
- Culture of low expectations/victim. Professionals lack of interest - Communication and Language
- Lack of support for families regarding communication related issues
- Lack of understanding of the court process, language used, poor ability to listen to case, poor ability to keep to timeframes, eg attend court case
- System discharges, non attenders to NHS services
- Language needs not being identified at early stage and no therapy for adolescents
- Poor social interaction skills rubs staff up the wrong way
- Inability to express thoughts, feelings, fears to justice system, eg in court, in groups "Individuals can't understand or be understood".

Impacts of communication difficulties:

- Increased costs of incarceration – restorative work less effective
- Institutionalised as criminals → mental health problems → disaffected and dysfunctional
- Suicidal ideation higher
- Disempowerment of young people
- Misinterpreting interview responses
- YO's with SLCN are seen as rude, uncooperative, having no remorse - "I smile when I am nervous"
- Impacts upon access to education training and employment opportunities
- Negative community perception of individual
- Social exclusion
- Increase in offending, eg burglary
- Increased resentment of authority
- Negative survival strategies
- Lost (critical) opportunities
- Increased severity of sentencing
- Challenging behavior
- Increased truancy rates
- Inappropriate sentencing and labelled
- Young person communicates aggressively (without communication skills)

Include youth

Three young people from Include Youth gave a powerful and moving presentation in the afternoon of their own experience of the challenges faced by offenders in Northern Ireland. Their attempts to recount their own stories of how they ended up in the justice system were a real time example of how poor communication skills can impact upon a young person's journey through the legal system. One young person explained their difficulty in understanding the formal language used when they were being cautioned and how this led them to misunderstand the implications of their actions for the future.

Three young people (Liam; Stephen and Gail) who presented at the conference are pictured with their Include Youth mentor, Mat Crozier. Looking on are Bill Lockhart and Alison McCullough.



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Jane McKenzie, Country Policy Officer England, RCSLT
Karen Bryan, Professor, University of Surrey
Diz Minnitt, YOT Manager, Milton Keynes
Heather Crawford, Country Councillor for Ireland, RCSLT
Helen Clarke, Highly Specialist SLT, PCT
Mat Crozier, Include Youth
Liam, Stephen and Gail (young people)
George Lowry, Head of Communications, Youth Justice Agency
Janet Webber, RCSLT
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Youth Justice Agency
41- 43 Waring Street, Belfast BT1 2DY
Tel: (028) 9031 6400
E-mail: info@yjani.gov.uk
www.youthjusticeagencyyni.gov.uk

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Arthur House, 41 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GB
Tel: (028) 9044 6385
E-mail: info@rcslt.org
www.rcslt.org

