

## Children and young people in custody and community youth justice

### R's story

R was a 17 year old Looked After Child. R had a history of persistent multiple offences and was a chaotic drug user. He was perceived by Youth Offending Team (YOT) officers as difficult to manage and engage due to his chaotic and volatile presentation compounded by drug use. His engagement with the YOT was extremely erratic. Although Child R complied with the terms of his Court Order, YOT officers were frustrated at the lack of progress in changing his behaviours. R was assessed by the YOT speech and language therapist (SLT) and diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder.<sup>1</sup>

R met with the YOT SLT in order to understand the implications of this diagnosis and the impact of the language disorder on his life. By working hard to understand how his communication difficulties have affected his life R has reworked the thinking that underpinned many of his offences. He can understand why he struggled at school and he has now developed strategies to enable him to maintain employment.

### Prevalence of speech, language and communication needs

Over 60% of young people who are accessing youth justice services present with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) which are largely unrecognised.<sup>2</sup> The research shows that people with SLCN are over represented in the justice system and if these problems are not addressed early on then these will significantly impact upon their functioning.

### Impact of speech, language and communication needs

- A young person with SLCN may lack the skills to be able to understand, weigh up and retain information and then formulate ideas.<sup>3</sup>
- Many young people with SLCN lack the language skills to understand what is happening to them or the implications of what is being asked of them.<sup>4</sup> For example, young people with SLCN have difficulty understanding the legal vocabulary used within the justice system, including words such as “remorse”, “conditional” or “breach”.<sup>5</sup> This risks jeopardising compliance with court process and instructions.
- Young people are provided with interventions as part of their sentence or order. Around 40% of offenders find it difficult or are unable to benefit from and access programmes which are verbally mediated, such as anger management, substance misuse or drug rehabilitation.<sup>6</sup>
- Around one third of young people have speaking and listening skills below the tested level of an 11 year old<sup>7</sup> and are unable to access education and treatment programmes due to their poor language and literacy skills.
- A study in Milton Keynes showed that young people with SCLN rarely indicated that they had not understood or needed help with tasks. Instead, they gave up, unlike young people with no SLCN who did request clarification and would persevere with tasks they found difficult.<sup>8</sup>

## **Recommendations in Bercow: Ten Years On**

***Bercow: Ten Years On* makes a number of recommendations in relation to youth justice including to the Department of Health and Social Care and the Youth Justice Board.**

*The Youth Justice Board and other relevant agencies should ensure that all practitioners who work in the youth justice system are trained in recognising and responding appropriately to communication needs, and develop a clear referral pathway for speech and language therapy.*

*The Youth Justice Board should:*

- *introduce mandatory communication skills training for all justice professionals as part of their initial training;*
- *monitor the effectiveness of the AssetPlus SLCN screening tool;*
- *develop a consistent pathway for justice professionals to refer a young person to speech and language therapy; and*
- *develop guidance for youth offending teams on how to best meet the needs of young people with SLCN.*

*The Department of Health and Social Care should:*

- *review the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) in identifying SLCN.*

## **Good practice highlighted in Bercow: Ten Years On**

*A Youth Offending Team has put in place effective systems for supporting the SLCN of the young people they work with. This includes staff training to help recognise SLCN and those with additional needs and disabilities, and development of programmes of support. Specialist practitioners support children and young people in court, advising on the impact of their communication needs.*

*The team continues to see needs being missed, leading to young people moving from school to school, out of any school provision at all or being home-schooled.*

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## **References**

- 1 Developmental language disorder: A life-long condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. There is no obvious reason for these difficulties – no hearing problem or physical disability explains them. It affects 7.6% of children.
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- 5 Bryan K. Prevalence of speech and language difficulties in young offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 2004; 39, 391-400.
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- 7 Davis, K. Lewis, J. Byatt, J. Purvis, E and Cole, B. (2004) An evaluation of the literacy demands of general offending behaviour programmes. *Findings* 233, 1-4.
- 8 Lanz, R.(2009) A pilot project examining the Speech, Language, Communication needs of young people accessing the Milton Keynes Youth Offending Team