In 2009 an AAC assessment service was jointly commissioned for children (up to 18 years old) by Cornwall Council and Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. Although a positive start in recognising the AAC needs of children in Cornwall, many barriers were present restricting the service the team could provide (Webb, A 2012). Since then, the team has gone through a series of significant developments, resulting in the disappearance of the two year waiting list held in 2016.

CAACAT now consists of a Band 7 Specialist AAC SLT and 1FTE (job share) AAC Technical Officer. Two developing Band 6 Specialist AAC SLTs (an additional responsibility) link in with the team to support succession planning. There are 5 main pathways, to clarify processes and timescales according to the nature of the referral and who is involved in supporting the assessment alongside CAACAT.

We have developed our training opportunities internally and externally, continually evolving in response to feedback received, national research and resources. We promote empowering parents/carers and teaching staff of high-tech AAC users to support their young people.

Overcoming barriers to develop our service

- Increased Specialist AAC Band 7 SLT from 0.2 to 0.4FTE (funded by Health)
- A 0.6FTE AAC Adviser post created by Education (supports high-tech AAC users to reach their educational potential within mainstream education).
- Refined service referral criteria to ensure referrals are appropriate, comprehensive and timely.
- Established referral pathways to aid consistency of AAC assessments for all young people referred and prioritise those with degenerative conditions.
- Files can be shared encrypted, everything is stored electronically and meetings are usually held in the school setting.
- Access to high-tech devices to trial basic AAC software (funded by Education) and light-tech AAC equipment e.g. voice-output switches (funded by Health).
- SLT administrator (0.4FTE) to create low-tech AAC resources (funded by Health).
- A bank of devices (funded by Education) to use as emergency loan devices so pupils are not without a device if theirs needs repairing or replacing.
- Increased training opportunities for parents, teaching staff and professionals.

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Secrets of Success

- We have identified the most successful assessment trials have been coupled with a high parental involvement, subsequently parents/carers are expected to attend all meetings and an agreement is signed between the team and the parents/carers whilst discussing expectations from both sides.
- Parents/carers and settings have told us our free two-day AAC Steps training has been invaluable as they feel better able to support the young person.
- We are committed to ensuring the child is at the centre of our involvement.
- CAACAT are a small team, covering a unique area of the UK, so it is imperative to open communication across other services e.g. being part of the AAC Exams Access Working Group (https://sites.google.com/view/aacexamsaccess/home)

Feedback received

"[The team] has lots of good ideas and is quick to action these in school to maximise their impact for the child; and staff feel really supported"

"Your practical approach has also been very welcome in our meetings together, offering a positive, supportive and practical opinion on the pupil’s needs"

"[The course was] very informative, plenty of chance to ask questions and source advice. Presenters very approachable and you are very much encouraged to participate and engage in activities. A real holistic approach"

The future...

- Establishing provision for local assessment of high-tech AAC needs beyond 18 years old.
- Researching more effective ways of managing a large amount of equipment, due to the estimated increasing future need for high-tech AAC.
- Upskilling of the workforce re. high-tech AAC.
- Exams access needs.

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Over to you

Porter & Kirkland, 1995, p.93-94