

Written evidence from The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Summary

1.1 The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is delighted to provide a submission to the Justice Committee inquiry into prison reform.

1.2 From the evidence submitted, we have outlined the need to identify the significant proportion of individuals in the Criminal Justice System with speech, language and communication needs allowing greater access to rehabilitative services.

2. About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

2.1 The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists, speech and language therapy students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT currently has almost 17,000 members. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies.

3. About Speech and Language Therapists

3.1 Speech and Language Therapists assess and treat speech, language and communication problems in people of all ages, including children and young people, to help them communicate better. Using specialist skills, SLTs work directly with young people, their families, and other professionals to develop personalised strategies which support people with speech language and communication needs (SLCN), including providing alternative and augmentative communication aids.

3.2 Speech and language therapists also provide training to the wider workforce and develop strategies so that they can improve the communication environment of young people with SLCN, identify the signs of SLCN and provide effective support.

4. Levels of need

4.1 It is widely accepted that around 60% of young people in the justice system have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).¹

4.2 Although there has been less attention paid to adult offenders, the research that has been conducted in this population indicates that levels of SLCN may be much higher in the adult prison population than in the general population.

4.3 As highlighted by the Prison Reform Trust in the Bromley Briefings 2016, 20-30% of people in prison are estimated to have learning disabilities or difficulties that interfere with their ability to cope with the criminal justice system. However, nearly a third (32%) of people assessed in prison said they had a learning disability or difficulty². While four-fifths of prisoners with learning disabilities or difficulties report having problems reading prison information – they also had difficulties expressing themselves and understanding certain words³.

4.4 A project based in Pontypridd Probation Service showed that all participants had “below average” speech, language and communication ability, and revealed

¹ Bryan, K. (2004) Prevalence of speech and language difficulties in young offenders. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders; 39, 391-400.

² Skills Funding Agency (2015) OLASS English and maths assessments: participation 2014/15, London: SFA

³ Talbot, J. (2008) Prisoners' Voices: Experiences of the criminal justice system by prisoners with learning disabilities and difficulties, London: Prison Reform Trust

specific problems experienced with comprehension and expression, which would affect their ability to understand the justice system and to communicate their wishes and needs.

4.5 We can therefore conclude from the research that there is indeed a strong presence of SLCN within the prison population.

5. The Purpose of Prisons

5.1 This evidence has been submitted to address the rehabilitative function of prisons. The purpose of which is to prevent reoffending and allow social reintegration (through gainful employment for example) once a prison term has ended.

5.2 Numerous programmes are still made available (although at various degrees in respective prisons) to offenders during incarceration designed to address numerous issues including physical, psychological and social problems. These are provided through third sector organisations and other delivery partners and may range from treatment (for addiction) to educational and vocational training.

5.3 These programmes may not however be accessible to all prisoners. As many of these rehabilitation programmes are heavily verbally mediated, both access and effective utilisation requires effective language and communication skills. As previously discussed under *levels of need*, there is a strong presence of SLCN within the prison population; there may not however be functional access to speech and language therapy which would allow access rehabilitation programmes. This may be due to the following factors:

5.3.1 A lack of identification of SLCN and the need for speech and language therapy as a result a deficiency in workforce training

5.3.2 The availability of speech and language therapy services within prisons

5.4 Assessment for SLCN should be mandated in all prisons. This should be conducted by the prison and be done during the initial induction period as part of wider health assessments. This would allow for any potential SLCN need to be addressed with wider health concerns.

5.5 A model for this approach is the screening tool the Youth Justice Board developed with The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists as part of AssetPlus. The assessment of every entrant to the youth justice estate includes screening for speech, language and communication needs.⁴

5.6 A bespoke programme or training should be developed by the Ministry of Justice to allow for the identification of SLCN; this may be utilised to address and identify SLCN at any stage but also address workforce training needs.

5.7 A greater emphasis should be placed in the presence of speech and language therapists in prison health services as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

5.8 The provision of speech and language therapy would provide the possibility of equity of access and ensuring that each individual has the ability to maximally benefit from the rehabilitation programmes.

6. Key Opportunities and Challenges

⁴ Practice advice: speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in the youth justice system, (2015), Youth Justice Board and Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/speech-language-and-communication-needs-in-the-youth-justice-system/practice-advice-speech-language-and-communication-needs-slc-in-the-youth-justice-system>

- 6.1 As noted by the Independent Parliamentarians' Inquiry into the Operation and Effectiveness of the Youth Court, Youth Cautions and Youth Conditional Cautions must be explained and given in the presence of an Appropriate Adult. The guidance for Appropriate Adults "has been found by a joint inspection to be 'not simple or easy to read' because it 'is not written in plain English and uses legal terminology'... children and their parents may agree to disposals without understanding that they can be cited on certain DBS checks."⁵ A key opportunity here would be to produce guidance in plain English; this would allow greater comprehension.
- 6.2 The previous Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the Rt. Hon Michael Gove recommended the creation of "problem solving courts" in the UK. This would mandate judicially supervised rehabilitative programmes⁶ and may address the disparity in rehabilitation across age groups within the criminal justice system.
- 6.3 There is disproportionality with the number of individuals with SLCN in the justice system and those with access to registered intermediaries. Many individuals with SLCN are left unidentified and are not provided the services of a registered intermediary. A bespoke tool or training may address this need for identification allowing greater access.
- 6.4 The need for registered intermediaries is much greater than the number of registered intermediaries available. As a result, unregistered intermediaries supplied by private companies are being used. Unregistered intermediaries unlike registered intermediaries are not regulated or subject to any quality assurance.
- 6.5 The number of speech and language therapists available is limited in the prison system. Speech and language therapists have clinical expertise in the assessment and management of SLCN. They do not simply provide treatment, but also provide relational support particularly to young people. A good relationship with an individual in prison can provide the impetus for rehabilitation.

7 October 2016

⁵ Independent Parliamentarians' Inquiry into the Operation and Effectiveness of the Youth Court, Chaired by Lord Carlile of Berriew CBE QC June 2014

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/499465/tor-problem-solving-courts.pdf