

Addressing prison capacity and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable prisoners

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Introduction

- The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) welcomes this debate on addressing prison capacity and the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable prisoners.
- The RCSLT highlights the significant role that speech and language therapists (SLTs) can play in supporting vulnerable prisoners, particularly those with communication needs.
- This briefing provides key information on how recognising and addressing these needs can improve safety, rehabilitation outcomes, and the overall well-being of prisoners, especially those who are neurodivergent or have complex communication challenges.

Key questions for the Government:

- How does the Ministry of Justice propose to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that vulnerable prisoners, particularly those with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN), receive appropriate care and support within the prison system?
- What steps will the Government take to ensure that prison staff across the country are adequately trained to identify and respond to the needs of prisoners with complex communication and neurodiverse conditions?
- How does the Government plan to implement systematic screening for speech, language, and communication needs across all prisons to ensure early identification and tailored support for vulnerable prisoners?

Prevalence of Communication Needs in Prisons

Prisoners experience a disproportionate rate of speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) compared to the general population. Research suggests that:

- **Over 60%** of adult prisoners have communication difficulties
- Among young offenders, this figure can rise as high as **66-90%**

- Learning disabilities, autism, and mental ill-health are prevalent in prisons, all of these are strongly associated with communication difference or difficulty.

Unidentified and unsupported communication needs can lead to prisoners struggling to navigate the prison system, engage in rehabilitation, and comply with prison rules. Furthermore, unmet communication needs often manifest in behavioural issues, including violence, self-harm, and poor engagement with prison staff.

Impact on Prison Capacity and Safety

- **Challenges with rehabilitation and education programmes:** Many prison programmes are verbally mediated, making them inaccessible to individuals with SLCN unless appropriate adjustments are made. Limited access to rehabilitation not only hinders the prisoner's personal development, but also increases the likelihood of reoffending.
- **Escalating vulnerabilities:** Without proper identification of communication needs, vulnerable prisoners are at a higher risk of exploitation, manipulation by other prisoners, and emotional distress. This vulnerability can increase behavioural challenges, making prisons harder to manage and less safe.
- **Training for staff:** Despite the prevalence of SLCN, most prison officers are not adequately trained to identify or support these needs. Only a minority of staff receive relevant training, and this leaves gaps in understanding of how best to engage and communicate with prisoners, especially pertinent at times of heightened pressures. Programmes like the free online training 'The Box' developed by the RCSLT, offer practical strategies to equip staff with the tools to better communicate with those with SLCN. 'The Box' can be accessed via: <https://www.rcslt.org/learning/the-box-training/>

Recommendations

To better ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable prisoners, the RCSLT recommends:

1. **Mandatory screening for communication needs:** All prisoners, particularly upon entry to the system, should be systematically screened for speech, language, and communication needs. This would allow for timely identification and tailored support.
2. **Access to speech and language therapy:** Every prison should have access to SLTs who can assess prisoners, provide direct therapeutic intervention, and train staff to communicate effectively with individuals with complex needs. SLTs also play a critical

role in tailoring materials, rehabilitation programmes, and daily prison activities to meet the communication needs of prisoners.

3. **Comprehensive training for prison staff:** Embedding communication-focused training into the standard training programmes for all prison staff would increase their capacity to manage prisoners with SLCN. Ongoing professional development in this area is crucial for addressing gaps in knowledge and improving overall prison safety.
4. **Specialised support for neurodiversity:** Neurodivergent prisoners, including those who are autistic and/or those with ADHD, require specific adjustments to the prison environment and routines. Adaptations should include simplified communication methods, visual aids, and support tools like communication passports.

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