



The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales Submission to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee Inquiry: Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) in Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee inquiry on prisons, probation and rehabilitation in Wales. We are responding specifically to points 3, 5 and 7 within the terms of reference.
- 1.2. There is a high prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and swallowing needs amongst people in the criminal justice system – the subject of a recent one-day inquiry by the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee. Given the links between these needs and a person's ability to access and benefit from verbally mediated treatment programmes and to eat and drink safely, it is essential that the criminal justice system is able to identify and support communication and swallowing needs.
- 1.3. Current speech and language therapy provision for people in prisons in Wales is extremely poor. In comparison, we understand momentum is growing in England as awareness and understanding of communication and swallowing needs builds.
- 1.4. We are calling for speech and language therapists to be embedded within multi-disciplinary teams in all prisons in Wales and recommend that training on speech, language and communication needs should be included within prison staff training.
- 1.5. We also provide evidence on speech and language therapy services within youth justice teams in Wales as we feel this provides a useful lens to exemplify current challenges within the justice model in Wales.

2. About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

- 2.1. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is the professional body for speech and language therapists working across the United Kingdom. The RCSLT currently has around 22,000 members (750 in Wales). We promote excellence in practice, provide leadership, set professional standards and influence health, education and justice policies.
- 2.2. Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are experts in supporting people with communication and eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties. SLTs work in a variety of environments across the justice system.

Response to the questions posed

3. How suitable is the Welsh prison estate for keeping prisoners health, safe and ensuring they can access effective rehabilitation services?

Prevalence of speech, language and communication needs

- 3.1. There is strong international evidence that the incidence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) is much more prevalent in the offending population than in the general population (Talbot, 2010). The most recent statistics reveal that **71%** of children sentenced in the youth justice system in England and Wales (Apr 19 - Mar 20) had speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) (UK Government, 2020). SLTs work directly with young people with SLCN and/or support the staff and wider workforce around them. Many conditions which are strongly associated with language and communication difficulties, such as learning difficulties, autism and psychiatric conditions, are highly prevalent in the adult prison population (Bryan, 2021).
- 3.2. Those who enter the criminal justice setting often do so from settings where there is a heightened risk of people having communication needs which may not have been previously identified. For young people, these include being in care, excluded from school, referred to a community youth offending team, referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, a drug rehabilitation scheme, or having emotional or behavioural difficulties. For adults, these include being unemployed, in touch with mental health services, being in care or having a special school history (Coles, 2017).
- 3.3. The impact of SLCN on prison staff and the prison environment is huge (RCSLT, 2023). Where individuals cannot understand others and cannot express themselves, this can manifest as: -
 - Behaviour that challenges
 - Disruptive, aggressive and violent behaviour
 - Self-harm
 - Increased use of physical intervention and restraint
 - Segregation
- 3.4. Specifically with regards to rehabilitation and education, if speech, language and communication difficulties remain unidentified or unmet, people with communication needs may have limited understanding of, and participation in, the legal process, and programmes designed to reform and rehabilitate them which are verbally mediated. They are also at risk of not being able to participate in verbally mediated physical and medical assessments. Evidence suggests that around **40%** of young offenders find it difficult or are unable to access and benefit from rehabilitation programmes that are delivered verbally, such as drug rehabilitation courses (Bryan, 2004). Approximately **a third** of young offenders have speaking and listening skills below the tested level of an eleven-year-old (Davies, 2011) and are unable to access education and treatment programmes due to their poor language skills.
- 3.5. However, despite the prevalence of these vulnerabilities, we are aware that prison staff receive limited training on SLCN. Screening processes in prisons are ineffective, and there is no nationally used screening tool for communication needs. This has resulted in huge gaps in identification. Prison staff are often therefore unaware of how to best engage with and support people with SLCN. We believe that all prison staff need to have the knowledge and skills on the vulnerabilities that they will encounter, such as SLCN and how to respond to these.

- 3.6. The RCSLT recommend that training on SLCN, and other vulnerabilities, should be embedded into prison staff training. We recommend that this is implemented as part of prison staff induction and as ongoing training and development. Training should also be reviewed at regular interviews.
- 3.7. Prison staff would benefit from being able to speak to a professional who can support them to develop their skills, knowledge and flexibility in approaches in working with people with complex vulnerabilities. All prison staff would benefit from access to a speech and language therapist for advice, guidance and support.

The impact of unidentified swallowing needs

- 3.8. The age profile of offenders have substantially changed in the prison estate with data highlighting that prisoners are becoming older. As of 30 December 2024, there were 6,116 prisoners aged 60 or over (Gauke, 2025). Evidence indicates that prisoners consult healthcare services more often than 'standard' populations (Marshall, 2001). This suggests the need for a robust healthcare system within prison settings.
- 3.9. Dysphagia (swallowing difficulties) is a prevalent difficulty among ageing adults (Sura, 2012). Swallowing problems are associated with a range of conditions including learning disability, brain injury, stroke, head and neck cancer and progressive neurological conditions including dementia. They can also be associated with the use of anti-psychotic drugs. Left unsupported, swallowing problems can result in choking, pneumonia, chest infections, dehydration and malnutrition. They can also result in avoidable hospital admission and in some cases, death.
- 3.10. SLTs play a key role in the identification and management of dysphagia. Evidence from the speech and language therapy service at HMS Berwyn has indicated that managing the dysphagia needs of clients without them needing to leave the site has allowed for excellent client care and cost savings to the establishment.

Provision of Speech and Language therapy in prisons in Wales

- 3.11. There has been increased provision of speech and language therapy in prisons across the UK in the last 10 years. Significant evidence demonstrates the benefits of such provision (Coles et al., 2017). Where speech and language therapy is present, this informs what specific adjustments and tailored support need to be made to guide prison staff and support the person. In the absence of an SLT in a prison, mandatory training on the identification and response to vulnerabilities becomes even more important.
- 3.12. The RCSLT has received an increasing number of enquiries from prison staff and prison governors across the UK in recent years enquiring about communication needs. We developed a training package called the Box to provide prison staff with practical strategies to better respond to, and support individuals, with SLCN <https://www.rcslt.org/learning/the-boxtraining/#section-3>
- 3.13. Momentum is building with regards to speech and language therapy roles within prisons in England as awareness and understanding of communication and swallowing grows. We welcome the number of recent advertisements for SLT roles within prison clusters.
- 3.14. As we reported when we responded to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee's inquiry on prisons in 2018 and 2023, we are very concerned that despite steps forward in England that there has been little progress on ensuring speech and language therapy provision within prisons in Wales. HMP Berwyn has employed 1.5 full time equivalent speech and language therapists since 2017 to support prisoners with communication and swallowing difficulties. There is currently extremely limited provision at HMP and YOI Parc and no

specialist speech and language therapy provision at Cardiff, Swansea or Usk and Prescoed prisons.

3.15. In April 2023, the Senedd Equalities and Social Justice committee published its *60% Giving Them a Voice* report which examined the extent of SLCN amongst young people who have offended or are at risk of offending in Wales. The strong report, which highlighted the 'shocking over-representation of young people with SLCN within the youth justice system', made a number of clear recommendations. These included that;

- the Welsh Government should work with local authorities to develop plans for embedding speech and language therapists within every Youth Offending Team in Wales.

3.16. We argue that given the profile of the prison population, the same recommendation should be applied to prisons in Wales.

4. Is there sufficient clarity, co-ordination and co-operation between government agencies, the private sector and third sector organisations involved in offender management and rehabilitation in Wales?

- 4.1 Our experience from youth justice has made clear that there are substantial challenges with regards co-ordination and co-operation between government agencies. RCSLT Wales has been campaigning to raise awareness of the SLCN of young people within the Criminal Justice System for over 15 years when evidence reviewed by the then National Assembly for Wales in 2010 highlighted the lack of provision in Wales for young and adult offenders as part of the then Communities and Culture Committee report 'Youth justice: the experience of Welsh children in the secure estate'.
- 4.2 In December 2022, the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee held a spotlight inquiry on the SLCN of young people within the criminal justice system. The subsequent [60% Giving them a voice report](#), published in April 2023, made a key recommendation that; 'the Welsh Government should work with local authorities to develop plans for embedding speech and language therapists within every Youth Offending Team in Wales.' The committee also recommended that 'the Welsh Government should work with Police and Crime Commissioners through the Youth Justice Blueprint Programme Board to assess the feasibility of having dedicated NHS speech and language therapists working in custody suites at police stations with a view to embedding them across Wales in the medium term'.
- 4.3 Both recommendations were rejected by Welsh Government which argued that there are insufficient speech and language therapists in Wales to embed the profession within youth justice teams. Welsh Government subsequently held a summit on this issue in January 2024 where many youth justice services expressed strong support for embedding SLTs within teams but we have seen few outcomes from this event.
- 4.4 Whilst there has been some progress since the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee inquiry, only **half** of youth justice services in Wales have SLTs embedded within teams and many posts are subject to short-term funding from the Ministry of Justice. There are no SLTs embedded within services within mid and North Wales. There are also no SLTs working in custody suites at police stations in Wales despite developments in this area across the border.
- 4.5 We have reviewed recent youth justice inspection reports and youth justice plans in Wales. It is clear that HMIP actively considers speech, language and communication provision as part of the inspections regime despite it being a non-statutory requirement for youth justice teams. Access to speech language and communication support for children was a theme across recent

inspection reports from Conwy and Denbighshire, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn and Flintshire. All three youth justice partnerships had direct recommendations to address the gap in speech, language, and communication provision for children and ensure that services are provided which assess and respond to children's communication needs. We understand, from speaking with youth justice managers, that there is lack of clarity around funding streams with services blending together a variety of funding pots, primarily from the Ministry of Justice. Unlike Probation and Police there is no specific expectations in terms of what a "health resource" should look like within YJS. Funding is often very short-term which impacts on the ability to establish service level agreements with the NHS. We understand that funding from statutory partners (Police, Health, Probation) have not been adjusted for a number of years. It is vital that consideration is given to longer term funding and Welsh Government and UK Government work together to address the postcode lottery of provision

5. To what extent is there parity in services available to prisoners in England and those available to prisoners in Wales, including access to Welsh language services?

5.1. As we reported when we responded to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee's inquiry on prisons in 2018 and 2023, we are very concerned that despite steps forward in England that there has been little progress on ensuring speech and language therapy provision within prisons in Wales. HMP Berwyn has employed 1.5 full time equivalent speech and language therapists since 2017 to support prisoners with communication and swallowing difficulties. There is currently extremely limited provision at HMP and YOI Parc and no specialist speech and language therapy provision at Cardiff, Swansea, Usk and Prescoed prisons.

6. Further information


6.1. Please contact Dr Caroline Walters, External Affairs Manager (Wales), Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

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