

Justice and prison rehabilitation and speech and language therapy

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Key issues

- At least 60% of young people and adults in contact with the justice system have unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).ⁱ
- Adults in prison are more likely to have communication disability, difficulty, or difference than the general population.
- Young people with SLCN are more than twice as likely to reoffend than their peers without SLCN.ⁱⁱ
- 40% of young people in custody struggle to access verbally delivered rehabilitation programmes.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Without support, SLCN creates barriers to understanding proceedings, complying with orders, and engaging in education, healthcare and rehabilitation – increasing the risk of reoffending.
- When communication is accessible and adapted to individual needs, it reduces anxiety, improves engagement and leads to better health, education, and rehabilitation outcomes.

Why this matters

- The justice system relies on communication – from police interviews to court hearings, rehabilitation and resettlement programmes.
- People with SLCN may not understand what is being asked of them or be able to explain themselves. Many services rely on complex spoken or written language. Miscommunication leads to:
 - challenging, disruptive, and violent behaviour;
 - ineffective rehabilitation and therapy programmes;
 - increased self-harm or staff assaults;
 - breaches of community orders and recall; and
 - higher reoffending rates.
- Supporting SLCN is not an “add-on” – it is central to a fair and effective justice system, where individuals can access the rehabilitation they need to turn their lives around.

The role of speech and language therapists

- Speech and language therapists assess and support people with SLCN, helping them:
 - access healthcare, participate in rehabilitation programmes, education and training;
 - build confidence, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills;
 - understand legal processes and community probation requirements avoiding further offending; and
 - develop skills for successful community reintegration.
- Speech and language therapists also:
 - train justice staff to recognise and respond to SLCN and adapt their communication; and
 - support staff to modify verbally-delivered programmes and make interventions (from restorative justice to anger management) more accessible and effective.

Current gaps

- Access to speech and language therapy varies across prisons, probation, and youth justice.
- Adult prisons and probation services have failed to identify and screen individuals for speech, language, and communication needs.
- Most frontline staff have no training in recognising and responding to SLCN.
- This leaves the majority of people in the justice system unsupported.

Recommendations

- Ensure access to and embed speech and language therapy in all youth justice, prison and probation teams.
- Improve identification of SLCN through screening at all stages of the justice pathway.
- Fund workforce training: Ensure all staff are trained in the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists' The Box, which is free e-learning for justice professionals, to enable them to recognise and respond to SLCN.^{iv}
Ensure interventions are communication-accessible, with adapted materials and delivery.
- Follow the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists' Good Communication Principles in Justice Settings.^v

- Recognise SLCN in prison and youth justice policy frameworks and service specifications, with clear accountability for provision.

For more information

- Visit: <https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/where-slts-work/justice/>
- Contact: elissa.cregan@rcslt.org

ⁱ Senedd / Equality and Social Justice Committee (2023) “60% – *Giving Them a Voice*”: *Report on Young People with SLCN and the Criminal Justice System in Wales*. 19 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.senedd.wales/senedd-now/news/shocking-over-representation-of-young-people-with-communication-needs-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>

ⁱⁱ Bryan, K., Freer, J. and Furlong, C. (2007) *Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders*. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 42(5), pp. 505–520.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryan, K. (2004) Preliminary study of the prevalence of speech and language difficulties in young offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, Jul-Sep;39(3):391-400. doi: 10.1080/13682820410001666376. PMID: 15204447

^{iv} <https://www.rcslt.org/learning/the-box-training/>

^v <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/good-comm-standards.pdf>