

Speech & Language Therapy within Bradford Youth Offending Team

Report outlining the findings of a 6 month pilot project examining the Speech and Language needs of the clients of Bradford Youth Offending Team.

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Authors:

Marnie Crew – Highly Specialist Speech & Language Therapist

Nicola Ellis – Specialist Nurse – Bradford Youth Offending Team

Service Managers :

Paul O'Hara – Youth Offending Team Manager
Bank House, 41 Bank Street, Bradford

Karen Baguley – Speech and Language Therapy Manager,
Bradford Speech and Language Service, Undercliffe Health Centre, 17
Lowther Street, Bradford

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Abbreviations:

Abbreviation used	Definition
ISSP	Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Program
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy / Therapist
tPCT	Teaching Primary Care Trust
YISP	Youth Inclusion Support Programme
YOI	Young Offenders Institution
YOT	Youth Offending Team
YP	Young Person

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Section 1 – Executive Summary

Anti social behaviour and youth crime is at the fore front of many peoples' minds, including those in government, policy makers and those living within communities experiencing such problems. Anti social behaviour can include anger, aggression, lack of respect and disengagement from mainstream society. Recent evidence suggests that communication difficulties are a considerable contributory factor when looking at offending. Research suggests that 60 – 90%¹ of offenders have communication difficulties. Often these difficulties are previously unidentified and hence, not addressed within the generally verbally mediated offence focused work within Youth Offending Teams. This may result in lack of comprehension, internalisation and minimal change in behaviour resulting in re-offending. In recent months, the interim report of the Bercow Review has highlighted the importance of SLT within the youth justice arena.²

As a result of these findings, Bradford YOT in conjunction with Bradford & Airedale Teaching Primary Care Trust commissioned a jointly funded project to examine the communication skills of its client base. This funding allowed a Speech & Language Therapist to work within the YOT for two days a week for six months. During this time we investigated the communication skills of our client group and the knowledge base of staff in relation to SLT. The timescales included time for preparation and planning; assessment of up to twenty young people from a variety of orders with a representative mix of males and females. The assessments examined language comprehension and expression; social use of communication along with the young person's perspective on their own communication skills.

This report will examine the evidence, seek to draw conclusions and make recommendations for possible strategies to meet the clear local need which has been identified.

The key findings are:

¹ Bryan, Karen, Freer, Jackie and Furlong, Cheryl (2007) 'Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders', International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 42:5, 505 — 520

- There is a high proportion (74%) of communication disability in young people working with the YOT, which is significantly more than the average population (approximately 10%).
- This is a high level of severe communication difficulty, which is significantly more than the average population
- Much of the communication disability is undiagnosed, with few young people having seen a Speech and Language Therapist before
- YOT staff recognise a need for assessment and intervention of young people's communication skills, but lack confidence in doing this
- The language levels in formal situations such as court or formal interviews is arguably too complex for young people to understand and fully participate in
- There is an ongoing need for specialist speech and language assessments of young people within the justice system
- There is a need for routine screening of the communication abilities of all young people involved with the YOT
- There is a need for staff training to increase knowledge and confidence in how to deal with communication disability in young people

Section 2 – Introduction.

The Bradford YOT has become increasingly aware of the range of issues affecting young offenders and their behaviour. The YOT has supported research into the learning barriers that may impact on the young people including supporting a study into the prevalence of Dyslexia. This project was in response to the increasing awareness that speech and language difficulties may have been a hidden barrier to improving outcomes for all young people.

The project supported a Speech and Language Therapist seconded into the Bradford YOT (two days a week for six months) to undertake a sample of assessments of young offenders on the YOT caseload.

Section 3 – National Picture

Nationally there is growing interest in the speech, language and communication skills of juvenile offenders. There are some SLTs working within Youth Offending Teams although they are currently a scarce resource.

Recently there have been three other projects nationally, focussing on this area of work:

- Leeds: This project focuses on the impact of a communication skills program on young people involved in the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Program (ISSP);
- Brighton and Hove: An SLT has been employed in their YISP since 2004. The SLT works individually, in groups, on YISP projects and training staff and parents;
- Bolton: An SLT has recently been appointed to carry out a research project into the SLCN of clients of the YOT;
- Salford: An SLT post is funded for 3 days a week on a fixed term contract, to work in preventative services up to Referral Order level. There is currently no SLT in post.

However, discussions with colleagues working in this area indicate that although some SLTs are employed within the secure estate, they are unaware of any permanent SLT posts in YOTs.

Interest amongst SLTs is growing, with a Special Interest Group of SLTs Working with Offenders regularly meeting to discuss this specific client group. Recent studies have had some prominence in highlighting the high levels of communication difficulty in young people with behavioural difficulties and in secure settings. The Bercow Review highlighted the need for SLTs to become involved in working with young offenders. I-CAN, a national charity for Speech, Language and Communication skills in Children have hosted a 'Language and Social Inclusion' Conference and produced a position paper on this topic.

Mounting evidence suggests that young people who are socially excluded, have behavioural difficulties or are young offenders often have hidden communication disabilities. Bradford YOT sought to discover whether there was a hidden communication need amongst the young people working with the service, and what could be done to help combat their difficulties, improve outcomes, reduce re-offending and help ensure safer communities.

Section 4 – Methodology.

An initial planning meeting between the YOT manager and the Speech and Language Therapy Manager identified the primary objectives of the project were to:

- Identify where and how SLT services are offered in YOTs
- Assess young people and determine the level of SLCN in Bradford YOT.
- Produce a report detailing evidence for a longer term SLT service within YOT in the future. This project would provide a needs analysis which may suggest the suitability of continued/recurrent funding.

A further planning between the Project SLT and Specialist Nurse further identified a need to determine the YOT staff ability to:

- identify communication difficulties in young people
- refer on to specialist services (SLT)
- support the young person

As part of the induction process with the YOT, the SLT attended a full day at youth court and observed the language levels, noting down complex words used within the cases presented, including questions directly to the young people. As a response to this, four young people were asked to take part in a further vocabulary assessment to identify whether they understood key vocabulary from the court and explain the meaning of it. The vocabulary list can be found in Appendix 1.

Individual YP skills : Assessment of young people

Procedures:

Team members in the Final Warning, Referral Order and Long Term Teams were presented with information about the project during team meetings. All staff were also invited to attend an introductory presentation outlining the purpose of the project and possible outcomes. Case managers were asked to refer young people to the Speech and Language Therapist based on the information present. Team members were informed that suitable candidates for inclusion may present with:

- Poor communication skills
- Limited vocabulary
- Don't seem to understand the work being completed with their worker.
- Doesn't seem to be benefiting from the work being completed.
- Difficulties with anger management
- Poor educational attainment, particularly in relation to literacy difficulties
- Difficulty in relating to adults

Following a referral, an initial session was booked between the SLT and case manager. All sessions were led by the SLT. The initial session consisted of explaining the project and gaining consent for SLT assessment from the young person/parent; case history or discussion regarding health and school history; self awareness checklist; the first part of the assessment. A further session was then booked to complete the assessments. Further sessions were offered as necessary, particularly for complex cases or when the young person found it difficult to concentrate for extended periods in the initial assessment stages. Assessment results were fed back to the young person and their family as appropriate, to the case manager. Additional liaison was completed as necessary, with involvement from CAMHS staff, school staff, and health staff within the YOT.

Professional judgement was made by the SLT to differentiate whether the young person fell within the normal range or not. This judgement is based upon a set of formal and informal measures which will be outlined further in this document. Should the young person be deemed to be below the normal range, the SLT made a judgement of whether the young person suffered from mild; moderate or severe difficulties. "Within the normal range" indicates performance within one standard deviation of the mean; "mild difficulties" were felt to exist if the standardised scores fell between -1 and -1.5 standard deviations below the mean; "moderate difficulties" indicates performance between -1.5 and -2 standard deviations below the mean and "severe difficulties" indicates performance more than 2 standard deviations below the mean.

When the assessments were completed, a brief report was written. This outlined the nature of the young person’s communication skills and difficulties as well as targets for the young person and YOT staff. The information was made accessible to all staff via YOIS software.

Sample:

The caseload of the YOT is split approximately equally between different tiers of involvement, with one third of the caseload with the Final Warning Team, one third of the caseload with the Referral Team and one third within the Long Term team/ISSP. In total nineteen young people completed the assessments, with a much higher weighting of young people involved with the Long Term team or Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Program (ISSP). An additional four young people withdrew from the project in the initial assessment stage.

Table 1 Division of referrals across the YOT team

	No of young people	Percentage of Young people
Final Warning Team	5	26
Referral Order Team	4	21
Long Term Team	4	21
Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Program	6	31
Total participants	19	100

The participants ranged in age from 11 years, 8 months to 17 years 9 months, with a mean age of 15 years, 2 months.

Case managers were asked to refer males and females in line with male/female ratios within the caseload of the YOT. There is an approximate ratio of 80% male, 20% female in the caseload of the YOT. Following the referral procedure, there was a slightly higher percentage of females in the sample as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Division of referrals across male/female participants

	No of young people	Percentage of Young people
Male	13	68
Female	6	31
Total participants	19	100

Language Assessment:

A set of formal and informal measures were used with each individual in conjunction with a self assessment template completed independently by the young person. Tools were selected to give standardised scores for the appropriate ages of the young people and to provide a broad base of information regarding the young person's general language skills and communicative functioning.

British Picture Vocabulary Scales – 2nd Edition (BPVS-II) (Dunn et al, 1997)

The BPVS-II is a measure of understanding of vocabulary in standard English. The young person is asked to select the correct picture to match a spoken word from a choice of four pictures. The words become increasingly complex throughout the test. The test provides standardisation up to the age of 15 years, 8 months. Beyond this standardisation, the test also provides an age equivalence score based on the number of correct responses, and can therefore be used for information gathering for subjects older than this range. The test is standardised across different ages, genders, geographical areas and ethnic groups.

Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals – 4th UK Edition (CELF-4) (Wiig et al, 2006)

The CELF-4 is a measure using a range of different subtests in different areas of language ability. A selection of the most clinically sensitive tests is administered to give a 'Core Language Score'. This selection changes across different age ranges but the 'Core Language Score' gives an indication of the general language ability of the subject. Further subtests can be administered to give further information on language skills; however the 'Core Language Score' was used to assess the general language skills of the young people within the project. The CELF-4 was recently standardised across different ages, genders, geographical areas and ethnic groups within the UK up to the age of 16 years 11 months.

Test of Adolescent and Adult Language – 4th Edition (TOAL-4) (Hammill et al, 2007)

The TOAL is an alternative language measure which is standardised on the US population. This test was chosen as a standardised language measure for participants above the cut-off age for the CELF-4, as the TOAL is standardised up to age 24 years, 11 months.

Expressive, Reception and Recall of Narrative Instrument (ERRNI) (Bishop, 2004)

The ERRNI is a standardised assessment which assesses the ability to tell a story, understand it and remember it after a delay. The test has been standardised in the UK on a small representative sample. This assessment was chosen as a previous study on young offenders and language skills has shown that this population presented with more difficulties in this area when compared to the local population. (Snow, 2005)

Self assessment checklist

The young person was asked to complete a checklist to identify any areas of communication in which they perceived a difficulty. This checklist was one part of the self assessment set out in a study on language abilities in young offenders.³

Staff questionnaire

During the briefing sessions as outlined above, YOT staff were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their knowledge and skills about the speech and language needs of young people. The questionnaire was designed to find out about staff understanding of the impact of communication difficulties on young people and their knowledge and confidence in dealing with young people with SLCN (see Appendix 2).

³ Bryan, K., Freer, J., and Furlong, C., (2007) 'Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders', *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 42:5, 505 – 520

Section 5 – Results

Individual YP skills: Assessments of young people

Initial interview and case history indicated that of the participants, only one (5.2%) had previously seen a SLT. Only four (21%) regularly attended school, although twelve were of compulsory school age. Five of the participants had a known family history of SLCN and/or literacy difficulties. Only two (10.4%) of the sample spoke English in addition to other languages.

The SLT rating is based on the combined performance across the three main assessments, based on standardised scores and the impact of these difficulties on the YP's everyday communication. The SLT ratings and standardised scores indicate that a significant number of young people, across all stages of involvement with the YOT, present with SLCN when their skills are compared with age peers.

Table 3 Performance of the participants across the YOT

	No of young people	% of Young people
Within normal range	5	26%
Performance below the average range (including mild, moderate, severe difficulties)	14	74%

When analysing these results further, this indicates that only five of the young people assessed (26%) had skills in the normal range. A further three (16%) had mild difficulties in their communication skills. Three (16%) had moderate communication difficulties. Most concerning of all, eight of the young people presented with severe communication difficulties, making up almost half of the sample (42%).

Table 4 Performance of the participants by level of order

	Final Warning		Referral Order		Long Term		ISSP	
	No of YP	% of YP	No of YP	% of YP	No of YP	% of YP	No of YP	% of YP
Within normal range	2	40	1	25	0	0	2	33
Mild difficulties	0	0	2	50	0	0	1	16
Moderate difficulties	1	20	0	0	0	0	2	33
Severe difficulties	2	40	1	25	4	100	1	16
Total participants	5		4		4		6	

A comparison between male and female participants shows that while 50% of the female participants were within the normal range on assessment, only 8% of males were within the normal range and 92% of male participants showing some form of communication difficulty. Level of communication difficulty is indicated in Table 5.

Table 5 Performance of the participants divided into male/female participants

	No of males	Percentage of males	No of females	Percentage of females
Within normal range	1	8	3	50
Mild difficulties	2	15	2	33
Moderate difficulties	2	15	1	17
Severe difficulties	8	62	0	0
Total participants	13		6	

The BPVS, a measure of the understanding of words, gives an "age equivalence" for all participants. The average age of the sample was 15 years 2 months but the average receptive vocabulary score was 11 years 4 months therefore on average, the YOT sample were scoring 4 years 2 months below their chronological age. The scores ranged between 7 years 1 month and 16 years 6 months. Only two of the participants achieved their chronological age equivalence.

The five young people who had a known family history of speech, language or literacy difficulties all presented with moderate or severe communication disability, indicating that this could be one possible 'red flag' indicator of the need for specialist assessment.

Sixteen young people completed the self assessment checklist prior to completing the assessment sessions. Thirteen (81%) indicated that they felt they had some type of communication difficulty. However, when compared to the results based on assessment, only nine (56%) of the responses were consistent with the difficulties identified in the SLT assessment. This further highlights the need for formal assessment as self reporting may not be an accurate reflection of the young person's actual difficulties.

Key court vocabulary

Four young people were asked to discuss some of the words they were likely to hear in court, and explain the meaning of the words as discussed. Of the four young people, one had language skills 'within the normal range', another did not complete the formal language assessment, and two had 'severe difficulties'.

Of the vocabulary of 'people in court', young people recognised the names of roles, but were confused about the roles - 'magistrate' was described as 'the two people who sit next to the judge'; 'defence' was described as 'someone who's trying to show the judges what you've done'.

One of the young people was only able to recognise and adequately explain the meanings of seven of the thirty seven words presented. All of the young people confused some word meanings despite recognising many of the words. 'Relevant' was explained as 'you were there, you did it'; 'alleged' was 'whether you understand it or not'. All of the young people acknowledged that they struggled to understand the language in the courtroom.

Staff questionnaire

The staff questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was returned by twelve staff. The mean caseload of the staff was 13.8 young people, ranging from ten to thirty young people.

Staff were asked what proportion of their caseload they felt had communication difficulties. Most staff (50%) felt that 40 – 60% of their caseload had communication difficulties, with some staff estimating even higher levels of communication difficulties.

Table 6 Number of staff and perceived proportions of young people with communication difficulties

% of YP with communication difficulties	No of staff	% of staff
0 – 20%	2	17
20 – 40%	1	8
40 – 60%	6	50
60 – 80%	3	25
80 – 100%	0	0

Staff were able to identify a variety of areas where they might observe communication difficulties. Six (50%) felt that young people often struggled to explain things. Staff reported that they felt this could affect frustration levels, confidence and self esteem of young people.

Other areas identified by the staff include: poor or limited vocabulary, poor interpersonal skills, poor eye contact, difficulty seeing another's point of view, difficulty expressing feelings, stammer and speech difficulties. Two staff identified listening and understanding difficulties.

Most staff had "some confidence" in identifying and dealing with communication difficulties. No staff had "lots of confidence". Six (50%) did not know how to refer to SLT.

All staff felt an SLT could help in the YOT and were able to identify how an SLT could help. Staff would like an SLT to assess YP and identify their communication needs, work directly with YP, identify resources that are appropriate for YP with SLCN, give training and general advice/strategies for YOT staff and work within YOT projects.

Informal observations and conversations with staff indicated that although staff have some awareness that the young people they are working with have difficulties, they are not sure how to alter or improve what they already do to allow for those difficulties. When case managers discussed the results of a completed assessment and had the implications of this explained, they were likely to refer further individuals to the project, suggesting they had more understanding of how the SLT could offer specialised assessment and help for their young people.

Section 6 – Discussion

The prevalence of SLCN in the normal population is debated in the literature, but estimates indicate that up to 10% of children have a long term, persistent communication disability⁴. However, the assessments completed as part of this project indicate that young people involved with the YOT present with a significantly higher level of communication impairment, with 74% of young people assessed presenting with communication skills below the average. Young people across all stages of involvement with YOT, from first offence to persistent young offenders, presented with a high proportion of communication disability. This is also consistent with a previous study of the language and communication skills of young offenders which indicated that between 66 – 90% of young people at a secure college presented with language skills below the average range⁵.

The results have some bias as the young people were referred by case managers who had concerns or needed clarification about the young person's communication skills, thus it is difficult to compare the prevalence to studies of the normal population. However, there is still a significant percentage of young people presenting with communication difficulties.

Previous incidence studies show that around 12% of children referred to a speech and language therapy service would present with severe communication disability⁶. However, 42% of the sample within the YOT presented with severe communication disability, indicating not only a higher representation of communication disability in general, but also a higher representation of severe communication disability than the average population. Interestingly, all of the young people involved with the Long Term team presented with severe communication difficulties, possibly suggesting that more persistent offenders tend to present with more significant communication difficulties. Conversely, it could be argued that young people with communication difficulties are more susceptible to involvement in criminality or anti-social behaviour. Overall, these difficulties were also more frequent in males.

4 Lindsay G. and Dockrell J. with Mackie C. and Letchford B. (2002) Educational Provision for Children with Specific Speech and Language Difficulties in England and Wales Cedar and Institute of Education, University of London

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

6 Broomfield, J., & Dodd, B. (2004). Children with speech and language disability: Caseload characteristics. International Journal of Language and Communication Disability, 39, 303-324.

Only one of the young people had accessed SLT services before this project, indicating that their communication difficulties had been going undiagnosed. There is some suggestion in the literature that communication difficulties may be viewed as behavioural problems in adolescents⁷. It is important therefore that the potential for communication disability is recognised and screening or assessment administered more routinely for those young people with a history of behavioural difficulties.

Self assessments were useful in understanding a young person's perspective on their own communication skills. However, this was not a reliable method of identifying the type and level of communication difficulties the young people presented with.

Staff working within the YOT are aware of the significant level of communication disability in the young people they work with, but feel they lack knowledge and confidence in identifying issues and intervening appropriately. Only half of the respondents knew how to refer to SLT, indicating that if they were to identify a problem, they would not know how to then refer on appropriately. All staff felt there was a need for ongoing support from an SLT, both for young people and for training and advice to staff.

Given the significant levels of communication disability and lack of language comprehension in the young people assessed, observations of the complex level of language within the youth court environment would suggest that many of the young people may struggle to understand the proceedings and what is being asked of them, or misunderstand, leading to confusion. It is likely that this is also the case in other formal language situations, such as police interview. It could be reasonably assumed, therefore, that if a young person is misunderstanding the police/court procedures, they may be making uninformed choices, resulting in inappropriate admissions or sentencing. It has been suggested that interviewers require specific skills when interviewing people with SLCN. They should be adequately trained and aware of SLCN. In some cases it would be appropriate or necessary for an SLT to take on the role of Appropriate Adult for YP with communication difficulties⁸. This requires further investigation.

7 Bryan, K., Freer, J., and Furlong, C., (2007) 'Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders', *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 42:5, 505 — 520

8 *Communication Support Needs: A review of the Literature* (2007) Scottish Executive

Section 7 – Conclusions

There is a significantly higher level of communication disability in the young people known to the Bradford YOT than in the average population. This communication disability tends to be more severe than in the average population, particularly as young people move further through the youth justice system. This is consistent with previous research which indicates that young people with behavioural difficulties and young offenders present with higher levels of communication difficulties than the average population. Their communication disability is usually undiagnosed, and both young people and staff are unaware of the difficulties and which strategies to use.

There is a need for all young people involved with the YOT to have their communication skills and difficulties to be consistently and accurately assessed. Young people have difficulty in identifying and describing the nature of their own difficulties. There is therefore a need for staff to become more skilled and confident in recognising and dealing with communication difficulties. Consideration of the communication skills needs to be more routinely considered and assessed as part of the work that YOT staff do with young people. There are opportunities within the YOT work and projects to target communication skills, of which confident and knowledgeable staff would be able to take advantage.

There is also a need for the language within the court to be at a more accessible level so that young people are able to understand more of what is being asked of them, and what they are being directed to do.

Section 7 – Recommendations

1. All staff should be trained in identifying and providing basic support for communication difficulties.
2. A screening tool should be developed to help staff identify communication difficulties in young people. This screening should be done with all young people when they begin working with the YOT.
3. Additional training should be provided for existing health staff to enable them to complete preliminary assessments and provide Tier 1 and 2 interventions.
4. A clear procedure should be developed so that all staff know when and how to refer on to specialist services for communication disability.
5. Staff training or discussion should be available so that staff have opportunities to plan for and reflect on making work more accessible for YP with communication difficulties.
6. A review of existing offending behaviour packages should be undertaken to assess suitability and accessibility for young people with SLCN.
7. An open discussion on language levels between court and YOT management should take place to ensure young people's needs are being met in the courtroom situation.
8. Information for young people should be reviewed to ensure all language within YOT produced information is at an appropriate language level.
9. A highly specialist SLT should work with current YOT activities and projects to take advantage of opportunities for communication interventions.
10. Ongoing access to highly specialist SLT services for specialist assessments for young people, goal setting and individual or group work with young people as necessary. Group work could focus on:
 - a. Improving communication style/good communication skills
 - b. Learning strategies to increase amount of successful communication
 - c. Working within established projects to encourage development of communication skills in all tasks and with all staff
11. Continued support from the tPCT strategically, operationally and financially, to enable work to continue with this client group.

Section 8 – References

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Section 9 - Appendices

Appendix 1

Key vocabulary observed within Youth Court and discussed with young people

Custody
Bail
Compensation
Conditional/unconditional
Adjourn
Revocation
Reparation
Supervision
Concurrent
Impose
Punish
Punishment
Breach
Comply
Offence
Threatening
Conviction
Failing to attend
Liable
Responsible
Relevant
Contract
Attend
Report
"In your defense"
Actions
Attack
Victim
Alleged
Convince
Circumstances
Statement
Remorse
Guilty/not guilty
Magistrate
Solicitor
Legal advisor
Usher
Defense

Appendix 2

Staff Survey: Speech & language needs of young people

As part of the Speech and Language Therapy Project within the YOT, I am trying to gather information about staff perceptions of the communication skills of the young people they work with and how they deal with those difficulties. It would be really helpful if you could answer a few questions in order to evaluate the current situation.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about the project via email: Marnie.Crew@bradford.gov.uk or via phone: 436445.

Thanks, Marnie

1. How many young people do you have on your caseload? ()

2. What proportion of your caseload do you suspect have poor communication skills?

0 – 20% () 20 – 40% () 40 – 60% () 60 – 80% () 80 – 100% ()

3. What communication difficulties have you observed in the young people on your caseload?

4. How confident do you feel in identifying communication difficulties?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
no confidence some confidence lots of confidence

5. How confident do you feel in dealing with communication difficulties?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
no confidence some confidence lots of confidence

6. Do you know how to refer to Speech and Language Therapy (SLT)?

Yes () No () Comments:

7. How do you think a Speech and Language Therapist could help in the YOT?