

Speech and Language Therapy (SLT)

Summary of Findings of a 6-month Pilot Project in Bradford YOT - 17/11/2008

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. The SLT project (which ran from April to October 2008) 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.

Executive Summary

Anti social behaviour and youth crime is at the forefront of many people's 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% 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 Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) within the youth justice arena.

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 young offenders. During this time we investigated the communication skills of young offenders and explored the knowledge base of staff in relation to SLT. The project undertook assessment of twenty young people from a variety of orders with a representative mix of males and females and examined language comprehension and expression; social use of communication along with the young person's perspective on their own communication skills.

The key findings are:

- There is a high proportion (74%) of young people working with the YOT who have below average communication skills, which is significantly more than the average population (approx.10%).
- There is a high level of severe communication difficulty (42%) which is significantly higher 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

The full report is available from the Bradford YOT website.

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