

Press Release – embargoed until Monday 23 April 2012 0001 hours

COMMUNICATION COALITION RELEASES *SENTENCE TROUBLE* FILM AND CALLS FOR YOUNG DEFENDANTS WITH COMMUNICATION NEEDS TO HAVE THE RIGHT TO AN INTERMEDIARY

Leading voluntary sector coalition, The Communication Trust has today 23 April, launched a new film *Sentence Trouble* for youth justice practitioners working with young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). View here <http://www.sentencetrouble.info/film>

Sentence Trouble has been produced to improve the skills and confidence of youth offending teams, lawyers, secure estate staff, magistrates and the police so they are able to recognise SLCN and reflect on their own communication skills. It contains the views of experts such as Diz Minnitt from The Association of Youth Offending Team Managers and Haringey magistrate, Linda Logan.

The film makes a strong case for better communication skills within the youth justice workforce and calls for changes in the law to ensure young defendants with SLCN have the same rights as witnesses to an intermediary, who can support them to communicate with a police officer or judge.

In the general population, 10% of children and young people have SLCN, in the youth justice system this rises to at least **60%**. Young people with SLCN may not be able to communicate effectively at a police interview or in court, with profound implications for accuracy of statements, a fair trial and the sentence imposed.

Anita Kerwin-Nye, Director of The Communication Trust, says: “It is only fair that young defendants have the same rights as witnesses to support from an intermediary. An intermediary can also advise the court and police on how best to communicate with a defendant. We are also calling for specialist compulsory training for all lawyers and magistrates so they are able to support young people with SLCN.”

“In the interests of justice, it is vital that young people understand what is being asked of them and are fully aware of the procedures of the court. An informed workforce will ensure more young people understand what is expected of them and increase their engagement with appointments and educational opportunities. It could reduce the likelihood of reoffending or breaching court orders.”

“The Trust’s youth justice programme has grown exponentially thanks to partnerships with The Youth Justice Board and The Department for Education. We have trained over half of youth offending teams in England and distributed 40,000 copies of our *Sentence Trouble* booklet. This film has been developed as a ‘pass it on’ tool so that all youth justice practitioners can make communication skills their business.”

Professor Penny Cooper, Barrister and Associate Dean at The City Law School, who appears in *Sentence Trouble* says: “The law must change. Whilst intermediaries are often used for vulnerable witnesses we don’t yet have legislation in force for defendants so, when it comes to vulnerable defendants, intermediaries are much harder to find and funding is a major issue.¹”

“With more specialist training about SLCN, not only will law practitioners be able to communicate better themselves, they will be better equipped to spot a young person with communication needs and recognize when the services of an intermediary are required.”

The *Sentence Trouble* film includes:

- A magistrate, a youth offending team manager, a barrister and speech and language therapists explain the impact of SLCN on a young person navigating their way through the youth justice system from their arrest through to custody.
- Diz Minnitt, Operational Manager at Milton Keynes Youth Offending Team and Speech and Language Lead for the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers, makes the cost-effective argument for speech and language support in youth offending teams.
- Magistrate, Linda Logan, talks about complicated court jargon and welcomes specialist training about SLCN for magistrates as this is not a part of their mandatory legal training.
- Ian Warriner, Speech and Language Therapist at Bolton Youth Offending team (YOT) and Helen Clarke from Islington Youth Offending Service explain how they support their YOT teams to communicate with young people in a more accessible way.
- Young people reflect on how they feel when jargon is impenetrable, procedures are confusing or written material is unexplained.

The Communication Trust will be focusing over the next year on expanding its resource portfolio for youth justice practitioners, extending the programme and training for the police and working in partnership with DFuse, which provides training to help people deal with antisocial behaviour.

To view the film, visit www.sentencetrouble.info

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Notes to Editors:

- The Communication Trust is a campaigning voice for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). It raises awareness, influences policy, promotes best practice among the children’s workforce and commissions work from its members.
- The Communication Trust is a coalition of nearly 50 leading voluntary sector and community based organisations.
- It has an extensive advisory and partner network that includes the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), Achievement for All, Council for Disabled Children, Early Support Programme and specialists across early years, schools and youth justice.
- For more information, visit www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk
- Dfuse is a not for profit organisation which provides training to help people deal with challenging and antisocial behaviour wherever they encounter it, in the workplace, in the street, in their communities. www.dfuse.org.uk

¹ Under Section 104 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 is not yet in force and no date has been set for its implementation.