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Lost for Words: Lost for Life
Conference highlights persistent gaps in services for young people with speech, language and communication difficulties

Delegates attending a conference last week, expressed their concern at persistent gaps in services for teenagers and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties and stressed that the proposed NHS reforms could exacerbate the situation.

400 delegates from across the country and overseas met at City University London for the three-day *Lost for Words: Lost for Life* conference, which was timed to coincide with the National Year of Communication. The event was arranged and hosted by City University London in conjunction with UK charities, I CAN and Afasic, and was opened by the Rt Hon John Bercow MP, Speaker of the House of Commons.

The conference was unique in bringing together teachers, teaching support staff, speech and language therapists, psychologists, academic researchers, youth workers and Primary Care Trust managers and Commissioners. It also featured talks from young people who have used speech and language services and their families.

Dr. Victoria Joffe, Reader in Developmental Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties, City University London, said that despite the 2008 Bercow review highlighting the gap in speech and language services for secondary aged students, delegates were united in their concern about a continued lack of facilities for this group, as well as for young people with speech, language and communication difficulties in further education and into adulthood.

“While some improvements have been made and awareness has been raised in some areas, the reality is that particularly for secondary aged students there are still big inconsistencies in terms of local speech and language resources. It really is a postcode lottery with no uniformity across areas and in most cases significant gaps in services.

“Furthermore, there are also virtually no services available for young adults after they have left school.

“Research suggests that speech and language problems in secondary school aged children and young adults are more likely to be complex and are associated with other difficulties including memory, attention, behaviour and social and emotional functioning.

“There is also clear evidence that without the right services, young people who don't have the right access to speech and language services are vulnerable to being left behind and disadvantaged in life, so this is clearly a big issue.”

“Research shows that students in secondary schools, who have not been picked up previously in primary school, are showing significant speech, language and communication difficulties which impact on educational attainment and general well being. These students

need to be identified as quickly and early as possible in secondary school and a range of appropriate and effective support structures need to be put in place.”

Delegates and speakers also expressed their concern that the proposed NHS reforms could worsen the situation, particularly if it results in the further fragmentation of health, education and social services.

“Inconsistency in commissioning, local austerity measures, coupled with the probability that the proposed NHS reforms may result in less integration between health, education and welfare services, means that we are facing a situation where things could get even worse,” said Dr Joffe.

Mary Hartshorne, Head of Quality and Outcomes at I CAN, said that the event highlighted the need to move beyond merely identifying the service gaps.

“Raising awareness of the issues of language and communication in young people at secondary school is not enough. We have to also ensure that there is support in place to ensure these needs are met. Delegates at the conference indicated that more training and support is needed in secondary schools; schools need to have access to programmes and interventions that work for this group. Presenters shared some good examples of the positive impact of this in schools.

“We have come a long way since the last major survey of services to support young people with speech, language and communication needs in 2000. But it is important not to lose this momentum. We know that the relationship between language, literacy skills and learning continues to be important during the secondary years, so a continued focus on supporting young people’s language skills in secondary school is very important, despite increasing pressure on local services.”

Linda Lascelles, Afasic Chief Executive, said: “For young people with communication needs, secondary school can be a difficult place. The conference was an opportunity to hear from young people with communication difficulties directly. Young people can have very different perspectives than their teachers or parents on what it is like to be at school and what support they need. Therefore it is imperative that we listen to them. This conference helped to raise these young people’s concerns with a range of practitioners, who will take their messages back to local schools and service providers.”

The three day conference included a host of keynote talks, symposiums, presentations, workshops and posters which address issues around speech, language and communication, educational attainment, social and emotional functioning, employment and well-being of older children and young people with speech, language and communication needs.

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For more information, interviews and pictures, please contact Emma Selim, I CAN Press and PR Officer, at eselim@ican.org.uk or 0207 843 2543 or Hollie Jenkins, Senior Communication Officer, City University London on 020 7040 8783 or hollie.jenkins.1@city.ac.uk

Notes to Editors:

Keynote speakers included Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Dr Nicola Botting, Professor Susan Gathercole, Dr Victoria Joffe and Professor Maggie Snowling. Workshops by parents of young people with SLCN and the young people themselves were also delivered.

John Bercow MP’s Review of Services for Children and Young People with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) reported in July 2008. 1,000 parents and children responded to the

online questionnaire, 10 consultation groups were held around England and the Review team visited over 60 schools and services across the country. For more information on the Bercow Review, please go to <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Bercow-Report.pdf>

About I CAN:

- I CAN is the children's communication charity. www.ican.org.uk or www.talkingpoint.org.uk
- We are here to ensure that no child is left out or left behind because of a difficulty speaking or understanding.
- Nobody wants a child's potential to be wasted. It happens because communication difficulties are not visible, often mistaken for something else, or not noticed at all.
- I CAN's mission is to make sure that everyone in contact with children knows how important communication is, what a communication difficulty looks like and what they can do to help.
- We do this through:
 - Increasing public awareness of the problems children face.
 - Giving expert advice to parents and families about what to look out for and what to do.
 - Providing assessments for children so that their families know what support will meet their needs.
 - Giving teachers and people working with children the skills to help children who struggle.
 - Campaigning to ensure children and families get a better deal.
 - Producing resources, DVDs, posters and other information to help parents and practitioners support children with their communication development.

At the very heart of I CAN are our special schools which give expert care and education to children with problems so severe their needs cannot be met elsewhere.

About Afasic:

- Afasic is the parent-led UK charity representing children and young adults with speech, language and communication impairments.
 - It works to achieve their inclusion in society and provides support to their parents and carers. Afasic does this through its publications, national help-line and website as well as training for young people, parents and professionals.
 - Afasic members meet in local groups in many areas of the UK.
 - Afasic works in partnership with local and national government, professional and statutory bodies and other voluntary organisations.
 - Today, Afasic:
 - has over 2000 members – parents, professionals and supporters
 - is recognised as an authority in its field
 - provides training for parents and professionals
 - offers a helpline for parents
- <http://www.afasicengland.org.uk/>

About City University London:

- City University London is an international University with a reputation for academic excellence and a central London location. It was placed in the top 5% of world universities by Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2010-11.
- The University leads London in education, research and enterprise for business and the professions and is ranked 10th in the UK for both the employability of its graduates (by The Times Good University Guide 2011) and graduate starting salaries (by The Sunday Times University Guide 2011).
- City is broadly-based with world leading strengths in the arts, including journalism and music; informatics; social sciences; engineering and mathematical sciences; business; law; community and health sciences.
- The University attracts over 21,000 students from around 160 countries and academic staff from around 70 countries.

- City was founded in 1894 and in 2016 will celebrate its first half century since gaining University title. www.city.ac.uk.

About the National Year of Communication:

- The National Year of Communication, known as *Hello*, is a campaign to increase understanding of how important it is for all children and young people to develop good communication skills.
- The campaign is run by The Communication Trust, a coalition of 40 leading voluntary sector organisations; in partnership with Jean Gross, the Government's Communication Champion. Together we aim to make 2011 the year when children's communication skills become a priority in schools and homes across the country.
- Each month has a theme and June's theme is 'Imagine life for those that struggle'. In the UK today, over 1 million children have some form of long term and persistent speech, language and communication need. This can affect them severely and for life.
- The national year was originally proposed by John Bercow MP in his July 2008 Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN).
- The Communication Trust raises awareness of speech, language and communication issues amongst everyone that works with children and young people. It was founded by Afasic, BT, Council for Disabled Children and I CAN.