Youth Justice Best Practice Case Studies
Supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in the youth justice system

South Gloucestershire Youth Offending Team and Vinney Green Secure Unit

About our setting
This case study draws on the work of South Gloucestershire Youth Offending Team (YOT) and Vinney Green Secure Unit located in the South West of England.

Vinney Green, a 24-bed unit in the north-east of Bristol, sees a high prevalence of SLCN alongside ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), trauma, attachment disorders and learning difficulties. A similar picture exists for South Gloucestershire YOT. The team has around 160 current cases and many of the children and young people (CYP) have communication needs and disrupted education. Despite the pervasiveness, few CYP have had their speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) identified or arrive with EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans).

The speech and language therapy service for South Gloucestershire YOT, Vinney Green Secure Unit and Bristol Youth Offending Service (YOS) was set up in 2017 following a successful bid by the local Clinical Commissioning Group. The recurrent funding provides for four days of input from speech and language therapists (SLTs) to work with staff to identify potential SLCN and provide training, advice and resources. One SLT is allocated to South Gloucestershire YOT and Vinney Green Secure Unit (for two days). Another SLT works with Bristol Youth Offending Service (YOS). (This case study focuses on the former.)

Flexible working arrangements
Gaining access and agreement to perform assessments has at times been a challenge. To help overcome these frequent obstacles, many of the assessments conducted by the SLT are informal, observational and flexible. For example, in the Secure Unit where young people occasionally decline assessments, the SLT sits in on lessons (such as the ‘include class’ where new arrivals are educated) and takes her lunch in the canteen. These activities have helped to increase understanding and acceptance of the SLT service. When assessments are possible, the SLT provides the CYP with a personalised appointment letter, which includes a clear introduction to the assessment and the time and date of the appointment.

As a new service, the SLT has seized opportunities to collaborate and network with the YOT, for example by inviting the referring caseworker to sit in on CYP’s SLCN assessments. This has the dual advantage of allowing the caseworker to develop awareness of the impact of SLCN and providing the SLT with additional context about the CYP’s situation from the member of the YOT.

The SLT offers flexibility in terms of where she meets the CYP, taking into account a range of factors including the preference of the CYP, the safest place to carry out the assessment and whether or not they are in education. When assessments are re-arranged as home visits (often due to low school attendance or exclusion), the SLT uses this opportunity to speak to family or carers to gain a better understanding of the CYP.

Working in this environment requires a high amount of flexibility from the SLT as changes can happen suddenly, such as the CYP leaving at short notice or only being able to concentrate in a session later in the day due to sleeping difficulties.
Preparing and adapting resources

The SLT employs a variety of methods to make the Unit’s resources and materials more accessible to CYP with SLCN. At the Secure Unit, the SLT has simplified the Unit’s ‘search policy’ to increase understanding and participation. She has also written resources to support interventions around anger management and sexually harmful behaviour. These accessible resources use short, simple and direct sentences to help the CYP to understand what is expected and keep situations calm and safe. They also serve as reminders to staff of the importance of accessible communication.

The SLT has introduced vocabulary packs (developed by County Durham YOT) to help young people understand terms commonly encountered in the youth justice sector. The resource provides images, examples of how the words may be used in conversation, and any other meanings the words may have. The service also creates symbol sheets (using Widgit Symbols) to communicate key information. Following positive results, the Mental Health team at the Secure Unit now use the Widgit Mental Health pack in their work.

‘Communication passports’ are prepared to make staff aware of CYP’s individual needs. The SLT recently prepared a passport for a young person’s court appearance, which acknowledged his limited understanding (especially of time vocabulary) and poor narrative skills. Additionally, it provided recommendations to the court on how they could adapt their own communication. This helped the court to talk to the young person appropriately and lessened the risk of them misreading his presentation and communication.

Similarly, the SLT prepares advice sheets for CYP in the community, whether they are at school, home or within the YOS. In one example, the SLT produced an advice sheet for a child’s teachers and family after an assessment confirmed he required no further interventions. The advice included:

- using multi-sensory approaches (such as pictures, objects and real-life experiences to reinforce information)
- giving him time to process information
- ensuring he is listening before speaking,
- encouraging him to speak up when he does not understand
- staff avoiding sarcasm, idioms or metaphors.

The SLT explained and agreed with the child that she would provide this information so that the adults working with him know how to help him.

Training staff

The SLT has developed a training programme to enable YOS case managers and the Secure Unit staff to identify SLCN and appropriately refer for assessment.

“Much of what we do is not direct casework. Our role is to support YOS and Secure Unit workers and equip them with the skills they need.” SLT, South Gloucestershire YOT / Secure Unit

The training, which also covers strategies to support SLCN, uses a phased approach to transfer knowledge into practice. This begins with classroom training, which is followed-up by coaching and joint working sessions with the SLT. In addition, each YOT member is invited to observe an assessment session with one of their clients. The SLT also refers back to ‘The Box’ training (from the RCSLT), which the YOT completed prior to the SLT’s appointment.

Training is additionally offered to others within the Youth Justice System including panel members, mentors and magistrates. These sessions highlight the impact of SLCN and provide strategies on how to adapt adult communication and approaches. All training is evaluated to compare staff’s knowledge, awareness and confidence before and after the training. The SLT also provides individualised feedback following observation and coaching sessions to ensure that staff use the appropriate strategies, as taught during training.