



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Speech, Language and Communication Needs  
among Offenders, Victims and Witnesses:  
Briefing from the Royal College of Speech and  
Language Therapists/Youth Justice Agency

12 September 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs among Offenders, Victims and Witnesses: Briefing from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists/Youth Justice Agency

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)  
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Stewart Dickson  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr Seán Lynch  
Mr Alban Maginness  
Mr Jim Wells

**Witnesses:**

Mr Tim Connolly	Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Ms Alison McCullough	Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Ms Paula Jack	Youth Justice Agency

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Ms Alison McCullough MBE, Northern Ireland country officer; Mr Tim Connolly, policy officer, from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists; and Ms Paula Jack, chief executive of the Youth Justice Agency. This session will be recorded by Hansard, and a transcript will be published in due course. You are all very welcome. I invite Ms Alison McCullough briefly to outline the key findings from the research into the needs of individuals with communication difficulties in the justice system.

**Ms Alison McCullough (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists):** Thank you for extending the invitation to us to give evidence. We are delighted to give evidence to you regarding the prevalence and impact of speech, language and communication difficulties amongst offenders, victims and witnesses. We are each hoping to contribute to the presentation this afternoon. I will talk a little about the context of speech, language and communication needs, which members might be interested in. I will then ask my colleagues to expand on some of the other issues regarding the risks and impacts associated with speech, language and communication difficulties and some of the work that we are involved in with the Youth Justice Agency.

Most people, when they think of speech, language and communication difficulties, have an impression of what a speech and language therapist does or what a communication difficulty might be. Most people tend to think of a speech impediment or a stammer. It is important to clarify what we are talking about when we talk about "speech language and communication needs" (SLCN), because it often differs very much from the public perception of the sort of difficulties that face these individuals.

When we talk about speech, language and communication needs, we are not just talking about the ability to say words or make sounds; we are talking about receptive language skills and expressive language skills. As speech and language therapists, when we are looking at individuals with communication difficulties, we will be assessing both aspects of their skills in those areas.

SLCN are about defining the problems that the individual has in a variety of linguistic skills. If we think in linguistic terms when assessing an individual we want to look not just at their overall communicative ability but their semantic skills. Semantics relate to the meaning of words and how individuals learn vocabulary. We will also be looking at their use of language skills, which is pragmatics. Studies in pragmatics have led to a great deal of research, particularly amongst children and young people and adults with autism who have severe pragmatics or social use of language difficulties. We also want to look at syntax, the ability to put and form grammatical sentences and structures.

At the end of that, and I have deliberately left it until the end of the discussion, is the ability to use sounds, or what we call "phonological skills". A speech and language therapist looks at all those linguistic skills when identifying problems that an individual might have.

Things can go wrong with any of those categories, and individuals can have SLCN in conjunction with other conditions. For example, it is very common, and people understand, that somebody with autism may also have communication difficulties. Somebody with a learning disability or Down's syndrome often has associated communication difficulties. There are also acquired communication deficits, such as with people who have had a brain injury or trauma or somebody who has had a stroke. We also have individuals who have or have developed speech and language difficulties that are not associated with any other condition. In our briefing today we are focusing quite a lot on that group. Those are individuals with what we call specific language impairment (SLI). That is a speech and language difficulty that does not have another condition associated with it. They are children and young people who, for whatever reason, have not developed speech and language skills as a normal child would.

Therefore SLI often goes unnoticed or undetected, and it can also often be interpreted as difficulty in behavioural aspects. There are rules of developing language. An example that most of us are familiar with is immature speech. If you have grandchildren or your own children at home, watching their language develop is often an interesting and informative time for you as a parent. When a parent comes to a speech and language therapy clinic and tells us that they are worried about their child's speech and language development because they cannot understand what their child is saying, that is often something that we take seriously, because those children are not using the normal rules of language. If their parents cannot interpret what they are saying, it is likely that they are using substitutions in their speech that do not follow a normal developmental pattern. I am trying to draw attention to that because those are often the children and young people who fall by the wayside, are not identified early enough and then go on to suffer exclusion from school, behavioural difficulties or mental health problems.

Speech, language and communication difficulties encompass auditory processing difficulties and inability to remember or to sequence words and sounds. It is a disorder that is recognised by the World Health Organization. In Northern Ireland we have a regional school called Thornfield House that provides support for such children as well as speech and language units across Northern Ireland. Eight per cent of primary-school children have speech, language and communication difficulties. I am now going to ask Tim to talk about the risk factors that there may be for such children, particularly from deprived backgrounds.

**Mr Tim Connolly (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists):** Thanks, Alison. I will talk briefly about the work that the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has done with the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) for speech and language communication difficulties. The all-party parliamentary group produced a report into the links between SLCN and social disadvantage, which was published in February of this year. The Royal College provided the secretariat for the APPG, and, in addition to supporting the work of the APPG, the college has worked to raise awareness of the speech, language and communication needs of offenders, victims and witnesses. The report builds on the work of the Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP), which was a three-year programme of Department for Education-funded research. That probably represents the single most substantive body of evidence that we have on SLCN.

What does the report recommend and what does it say about social disadvantage? It recommends targeted additional support to improve the communication environments for children living in socially deprived areas. The communication environment in this context would mean things like the number of books available, the number of educational toys available, and trips to the library, for example. The

report also recommends that all the relevant practitioners be given the professional development support that they need to provide good oral language environments for all children, but particularly for those in socially disadvantaged areas.

What is the link between SLCN and social disadvantage? Well, as mentioned in our written submission, the links run in both directions. Professor Karen Bryan, the pro vice-chancellor of the faculty of health and well-being at the University of Sheffield talks about that as a "compounding risk model" that has impacts on many young offenders in which having communication problems at a young age puts a child at risk of developing literacy problems. Having those problems put a child at risk of developing further educational problems and, when a child reaches adolescence with speech, language and communication needs he or she is then vulnerable to problems coping with peers, with school and with family relationships. Not all children will acquire the risk factors in that fashion, but for many children the risks do compound.

There is good quality evidence to suggest that, unfortunately, once a child reaches secondary school communication difficulties often get labelled as behavioural problems. Looking at that link from the other direction for a moment, there is plenty of evidence that factors linked to social advantage limit the development of children's communications skills. Intuitively, that makes sense. There is also good quality evidence that vocabulary difficulties at age five are significantly associated with poor literacy, poor mental health and poor employment outcomes at age 34.

How strong is the link between SLCN and the offender population? There is good evidence from studies in the United Kingdom that the prevalence of SLCN in the youth offending population is at least 60%, as we have discussed in the written submission. Internationally, there is a consensus figure emerging that the prevalence of SLCN in youth justice is somewhere between 50% and 60%. There are also admittedly smaller-scale studies that suggest that up to half of children in socially disadvantaged areas could suffer from significant language delays. If we compare that to the prevalence figures for speech, language and communication needs in the general UK population of about 10%, you can see that there is a huge disparity.

What is the impact on offenders? Studies have shown that young offenders can have difficulties in defining words that are common currency in the justice system, such as "penalty", "crucial" and "caution". We can see the challenge that that can present in making sure that a young person has a fair and equitable journey through the system.

There is one other point that I wanted to mention. A young offender's language difficulties could make it harder for them to engage in verbally mediated therapeutic interventions. Something like cognitive behavioural therapy or, indeed, restorative justice conferences could present a barrier in which a very willing individual is just not able to engage because of a communication problem.

**Ms McCullough:** Looking then, as Tim mentioned, at the global evidence and the impacts, we know that this is not new evidence. Why is it coming to the fore now? Since 1937 research papers have been reporting on the link between poor communication skills and offending behaviour. There is a huge body of evidence coming out of Australia and America on the links between the risks and the poor social backgrounds of offenders and the impact that that will have on their communication skills development.

We have less information on victims and witnesses, and it is the same for Northern Ireland. However, some research papers indicate that girls and women are three times more likely to be victims of sexual abuse if they have a language impairment. We also know that language impairment is higher among women offenders than the general offending population and that higher offending severity is linked to poorer language skills. There is much more evidence coming out globally on the links and the impact and severity of communication skills and that impact on offending behaviour.

Moreover, as Tim said, if you have poor communication and linguistic skills, following the justice process can be incredibly challenging. Giving evidence or testimony if you have poor narrative skills, which is really the whole premise of giving evidence — giving a narrative account of what has happened to you — is much more challenging.

I will ask Paula to talk to the Committee about some of the evidence that we have been finding locally in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Paula Jack (Youth Justice Agency):** Chair, thank you for referring to Minister Ford's statement today on the appointment of a speech and language therapist for the Woodlands Juvenile Justice

Centre. I am delighted to announce that this afternoon, as it is something that Alison and I have been working towards for a long time, based on the evidence that you heard from my two colleagues around the needs in the youth offending population for specialist support for quite a large number of the young people involved in this.

We have heard the context. Let us think about what that might mean for a young person in the criminal justice process, from the very moment they are asked by a police officer: "What are you doing? Explain why you are on a street corner? Give me the reason for what it is that you are doing?" Frustration can lead to assaults, as we know. Frustration and an inability to communicate may lead to offending behaviour that might otherwise not have happened. How vital is it that justice professionals are not only familiar with those challenges but trained and able to deal with them? That is where the Youth Justice Agency has taken a lead to say that we want our staff to be familiar with this. You might say that, as the Youth Justice Agency is staffed by qualified social workers and youth and community workers, why are they not already familiar with the issues? Why can they not deal with them themselves? That was pretty much the response of a large proportion of my staff involved in the pilot that we took forward. We have been doing this for years, they said. Do we need specialist skills? Do we need experts to come in and tell us how to do this? The answer from those who have gone through the training and been involved in this is yes, they very much do need this.

It is a whole new world, as Alison said, when it comes to the understanding of real communication issues. All of us are familiar with stuttering, stammering or lisping. Those are apparent and obvious to us all. However, the hidden communication issues are the challenges that face us in the justice system. What I mean is the young person who might smile inappropriately during court proceedings or laugh at questions. How many times is it easy, in the legal process, to ask a difficult question in the courtroom and bamboozle a young person with a communication challenge so that they just agree with you? When you receive a sentence, the question asked by the judge or district judge is: "Do you understand?" Young people with communication challenges will say yes to avoid embarrassment, perhaps not even understanding the context of the question. Studies have been done on what happens in the courtroom and whether young people have understood what has happened. We have seen many examples where that is the case. We might ask young people when they come out: "Have you got what happened? Did you understand that you got a conditional discharge?" That has absolutely no meaning or context for that young person, and it requires a great deal of communication skills to get that to that young person.

What happens after the court process when a young person is sentenced? The most prevalent sentence for young people in Northern Ireland is, as you know, the youth conference order, which requires a restorative meeting with the victim. How challenging, having heard the evidence, is that for a young person who has communication challenges? It is very, very difficult. We require them to empathise with the victim, apologise and become involved in the work plan that follows. Not only that, the work that we do with young people requires challenging work in relation to their offending behaviour. Therefore, it is important that we communicate properly with them.

Staff who were reluctant at the beginning to think that we needed to receive specialist training on this would now say that this should be wide-reaching across the justice family and that everybody should receive specialist training. What did we do? We worked with the Royal College and carried out a pilot in our Lisburn community office and in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. We carried out an e-learning tool, which was designed by the Royal College to raise awareness of the issue among staff. We worked very closely with trust staff in the area to do joint training so that they understood the justice issues and we understood the speech and language and communication issues. We used the assessment tool to assess whether the young people coming to us had communication needs. You have seen the results of that in our paper. We screened 147 young people during the pilot. You will see that 79 of them had some communication needs. That is 54%, and that is just in one community office out of eight and in Woodlands. Many of those could have been dealt with, in that my staff have the awareness and ability to communicate properly with those young people and do not require specialist intervention. However, you will see that 17 young people, or 22% — a significant percentage — require the skills of a speech and language therapist to communicate.

Since 12 of those were in custody in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, you can see why I am going to base the speech and language therapist in the Juvenile Justice Centre. However, they will not work solely with children in custody. They will also work with all my community offices to provide training and support across the Youth Justice Agency, which I am absolutely delighted about. However, we need to take it further. We have engaged with the reducing offending partnership in the police. We are already a key partner with them in that work, which you are familiar with and have been briefed on previously. We hope that officers from the reducing offending units will be jointly trained with my staff

as we roll this out further. That is good news, going back to what I said initially about a young person being arrested and having to account for and explain where they are and what they are doing. I can tell you that you learn during the training that some of the hardest words are in forming the sentence: "I did this because". That narrative and explanation is crucial in the justice process; it is crucial to answering questions in court and to dealing with the offending behaviour programmes afterwards.

Those are our reasons for doing this. As I said, we are delighted to have a speech and language therapist, but that is just a start for justice. So much more needs to be done and so much more training needs to be carried out so that everybody is aware of the needs of young people, and adults, at victim, witness and offender level in the process.

**Ms McCullough:** Finally, we would like to draw your attention to paragraph 35, where we have made some recommendations. We are extremely pleased to have been able to work with the Youth Justice Agency, but I have also been involved in various working groups with the Department of Justice looking at vulnerable, intimidated witnesses. We are delighted that the Department of Justice has brought the intermediary scheme into Northern Ireland on a pilot basis and is the first area of the UK to extend that intermediary scheme to defendants. The world is watching Northern Ireland to see how the intermediary scheme works. We are very pleased that not only the Department of Justice but the Youth Justice Agency are supporting us in taking this work forward and, because they have identified these problems themselves, have recognised that actions need to be taken and that this is a collaborative issue. Communication cuts across health, education, employment and learning, and justice; it is an issue that everybody has a responsibility to address. Therefore, we draw your attention to our recommendations.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for the presentation.

With me, you are preaching to the converted. My younger sister is a speech and language therapist in London working with children in schools at an early intervention stage. Ruth has lectured me at home about the reasons behind some people's behavioural problems. People are often stigmatised because of such problems, when, actually, they could be quite easily explained as being to do with communication difficulties. I welcome the fact that this appointment has been made. I think that it is an acknowledgement from the Youth Justice Agency that perhaps we do not know it all and perhaps we need to have a professional who can help staff be more aware of things that are brought to their attention. It is good for the Youth Justice Agency to do that.

I have one quick comment; I do not plan to detain you. I note that one of your recommendations is for early intervention to be more embedded as part of the core team of youth justice. How important is that early intervention? You can deal with a child of 10 or 11, but in the earlier years, where you are identifying people at risk, how important is it to intervene at the earliest possible stage? What savings benefit would that have for society in the longer term?

**Ms McCullough:** It is absolutely crucial. Early intervention means different things depending on what age group you are looking at. We do have early intervention projects already in place and good collaborative working in Sure Start schemes, for example, where hard-to-reach and at-risk children have a collaborative approach. We can change children's and young people's lives by supporting them with their speech and language difficulties. Very recently, on the day that the A-level results came out, a parent phoned me whose child had been identified early as having severe communication difficulties. He went first to a Mencap nursery, where he received a diagnostic period. He was then referred to a speech and language unit, and was referred on to the regional unit that I mentioned previously, Thornfield school. There, he received a collaborative approach, with teachers and speech and language therapists working together. He was reintegrated back into his local secondary school, and his mum phoned me delightedly to say that he got two grade Bs and a grade C and was going to university to do a degree. This was a child who had absolutely no speech at age three. Obviously, he was fortunate in that he was identified and picked up. Even in the nursery at the time, there were questions about whether he had a severe learning disability. Without the speech and language therapists recognising the problem and making a clinical diagnosis that the child had a specific language impairment, he could easily have gone to a special needs school and have had difficulty in having his needs recognised.

Therefore, early intervention is crucial, and having a speech and language therapist on the team to do that differential diagnosis is also crucial. At a later stage, as regards criminal justice, having a speech and language therapist as part of the core team will enable that differential diagnosis to take place. As Paula said, children and young people get wrongly identified as having behavioural issues sometimes,

but if you go beneath the surface and look at their skills set, you find that it is actually a communication difficulty.

**Ms Jack:** Chairman, perhaps I can come in very briefly regarding early intervention from a justice point of view. Obviously, we assess young people when they have been referred to us post-conviction and sentencing. It is important to realise that there needs to be an earlier assessment with regard to justice, so that people have support through the whole justice process and not just once they are sentenced. That is why I am really keen to engage with the police and others in early identification and early awareness raising. It does not have to be full training and it does not have to be the full skills set with regard to having specialists everywhere to do that. However, having that awareness is vital in the justice system.

**Mr Wells:** All those young people would have legal representation at some stage, and most would be entitled to legal aid. As we will probably hear later, clearly a very large claim then goes in to the Legal Services Commission for legal aid. I would have thought that a qualified barrister or solicitor with experience should spot this matter immediately, intervene and acquire the services of someone to look after the needs of their client. Why are we in the situation where you are saying that many young people have been prejudiced because people have not recognised that they have communication problems? Having visited quite a few institutions with the Committee and heard just how limited some of the communication skills of some of those young people are, how has this been allowed to happen, and why have their legal advisers not called in the skills required to help those young people?

**Ms McCullough:** I will defer to Paula on this.

**Ms Jack:** There is a lot of research on this, and Michele LaVigne has done some research into understanding and awareness. This can be described as a hidden problem. It is exactly what I was trying to describe before, and my own staff see it too.

The belligerence, the not answering, the agreeing or the non-communication is not an obvious communication problem. I am a lawyer by trade, and under pressure to get cases through. You need understanding and expert knowledge sometimes to go that bit further and realise that this is not a difficult client or a difficult situation, it is a particular communication need. We are really lucky, because the Law Society, which is here today, has been very supportive of the work, and we have done a number of joint ventures with them in awareness raising. Michele LaVigne, one of the experts in the field, has been over to speak. Next week, we will have an event with Pam Snow. We are very lucky that we are having the chance to raise awareness and educate in conjunction with the Law Society.

However, there is lack of understanding and awareness about some of these issues — not with everybody, but with a large proportion of the legal system in general.

**Mr Wells:** It is obvious that people are very quick to call in medical or other forms of expertise, but this one has gone by default. It begs the question: how often, Alison, are members of your profession called in spontaneously by legal representation to help?

**Ms McCullough:** Not very often, is the answer, unfortunately, because there has not been awareness, even among the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It is much more likely to identify a child with a learning disability or a child or young person with autism at this point than it is to recognise a child with specific language impairment.

A case was brought to our attention last year in which a young woman with a communication difficulty was the victim of an alleged sexual assault. The police carried out their investigation without asking for additional help regarding her communication difficulties. Then, the evidence was inadmissible in court. The speech and language therapist was brought in only because the support worker suggested to the police that they should request a full speech, language and communication assessment. So, the difficulty is that people are not aware of the issue, which is why we are very grateful for the opportunity to bring it to the attention of the Committee.

**Mr Elliott:** Thanks very much for that. I have two quick queries. Alison, I think you mentioned that you did not have as much information on victims and witnesses. Have you any plans to try to ascertain more information?

**Ms McCullough:** Yes. We would very much like a communication skills assessment to be part of the preliminary assessment. As I said, we have been working very hard with the Department of Justice. We are involved in the vulnerable and intimidated witnesses working group, which is looking at the needs of vulnerable witnesses and victims. We would like to see part of that core assessment, when they are brought in to provide their supporting evidence, to be to establish whether they have a communication difficulty that is similar to the example that I have just given. We feel that the very first thing that has to be established before you start having a dialogue or conversation with somebody is whether that individual can give evidence without support or the need for additional communication support, whether it be signing systems, symbol systems, pictures or whatever. That should be established as a first point.

**Mr Elliott:** I have one final question. Is the speech and language therapist in the justice system funded solely by the Department of Justice?

**Ms Jack:** Perhaps, I will answer that because it comes from my budget. It comes from the Youth Justice Agency's budget. I have decided that it should be a priority and that we should find the funding to support it. With the Minister's backing, that is what we have done. So, it is, at the moment, solely justice-funded.

**Mr Elliott:** OK. There is no input from any other Department, such as the Department for Social Development?

**Ms Jack:** Not at the moment. I hope that we can have some cross-departmental support.

**Mr Elliott:** Are you planning to ask them?

**Ms Jack:** Yes. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lynch:** Thanks for the presentation. First, how far does today's announcement by the Minister go to alleviate your problems? Secondly, 54% of those who were part of the pilot scheme were deemed to have communication needs. That is very high. Is that reflected across the prison population?

**Ms McCullough:** I will let Paula answer that.

**Ms Jack:** The announcement will go a long way to address our needs because we were going to roll out the e-learning tool and training to all staff anyway. Having the speech and language therapist in post before we start the roll out will mean that they can be involved in that training too. So, we will be giving specialist training in conjunction with the PSNI and its front line officers from the reducing offending units. We hope to start very quickly, because, in the Lisburn area and the juvenile justice centre, staff have been trained to assess, so that we can make immediate referrals with those young people and have clinics, in essence, straight away. So, it will go a long way to address the needs of those sentenced young people in the justice system.

**Ms McCullough:** However, taking a strategic view across the whole population in the prison system and custodial settings, as well as in community services, obviously, the appointment is, as I understand it, on a temporary basis. We are just scratching the surface, to be honest, in terms of the need. More importantly, we need to think about the economic or cost-benefit value of this. Speech and language therapy is traditionally a health provision. The longer-term outcomes and cost benefits may well lie in a different jurisdiction with regard to reducing offending or decreasing challenging behaviour episodes. That is partly why we need to have a view that the issue needs cross-departmental support, not just the support of one Department, because of the implications across all aspects.

**Mr Lynch:** There is no doubt that we need to work with the education system, because we are wondering why so many young people slip through that system without being identified.

**Ms Jack:** I will answer that in the context of the youth justice population. Quite often, those young people have been disengaged from many things, including education, and they may not have been taken for appointments as young children. They have gone so far in their young lives and reached a point where, once they are in the justice system, these issues have been identified. Families are not taking young people for appointments; it is not just in speech and language but it can be in many health issues.



**The Chairperson:** The report cites a study on the prevalence of speech and language problems in the Colin area, which is a good piece of work. We are pulling together something similar in Lisburn. I do not want people to think that other Departments are not involved, because Education and Health are very much involved in the work in Colin. The Youth Justice Agency has a representative on the programme in Lisburn, too, and we may be looking for Justice to help fund a wider project for education and health benefits. The point is well made. All Departments should be working together; we should not be waiting until people get into prison and we should not just be working in schools. The work needs to be done across the piece.

**Mr McCartney:** The statistics say that the figure is 41% in Colin and, I think, 55% in Twinbrook. Was that detected at the time or was it a post-project analysis?

**Ms McCullough:** It was a project that screened primary 1 schoolchildren on entry into school. That was detected at the time of the pilot.

**Mr McCartney:** When should it have been detected?

**Ms McCullough:** Often, speech, language and communication difficulties are not detected because they are interpreted as a different problem. So, with a difficult toddler, people might not necessarily understand that a communication difficulty, and not a behavioural issue, is the problem. We have been working a lot with Education and Health in joint projects such as the multiagency support (MAS) teams that have gone into schools, and we work alongside teachers in varying projects across Northern Ireland to support and train them in recognising speech, language and communication skills. We have also started to work much more with renewing community groups so that day-care providers have the same information and skills to detect speech and language difficulties and communication difficulties at a much younger stage.

**Mr McCartney:** Has it improved by the time they leave primary school?

**Ms McCullough:** It was a short-term project. We do not have the information to look at the longer-term outcomes, but we know that with proper provision and support, the outcomes are better for children who have received intervention.

**Mr McCartney:** Your research shows that 60% of people in the criminal justice system have poor communication skills. Has any analysis been done on how many people find themselves in the system as a direct result of poor communication?

**Ms McCullough:** We do not have that research.

**Mr Connolly:** Are you wondering how big a factor it is? I guess that it would be a complex picture with different causalities involved. Alison is right: we do not have specific research that looks just at communication.

**Mr McCartney:** All the appropriate agencies and people in the system are aware that one in two people cannot communicate properly. If police officers approach some young fella, in the main, in the street who they perceive has done something wrong, will they be aware that there is a one-in-two chance that he will not be able to communicate properly and act accordingly, or are they oblivious to it?

**Ms Jack:** I think that it is important to note from the study that there are different levels of communication ability; around 22% needed specialist intervention.

It is about awareness-raising; that is why it is so important that we are here today and that we carry on this work. Alison and her colleagues have worked tirelessly to raise the issue. I want to involve the police in joint-training with us, because it is the front line officers from the reducing offending units who deal with the young people we are talking about, and it is important that they understand that questions have to be phrased simply. It is not necessarily about being able to use a speech and language therapist to assist you in communicating with them; it is about asking something in a different way. I have learnt that through this work over the past three years. When I ask questions of young people in custody, or when they ask me something, I explain it very differently now than I might have done three years ago. I take my time and rephrase things. I do not ask long and complex questions with lots of "ands", "buts", "ifs" and "whens". I try to keep things as simple as I can. I think

that that is the key message for professionals in the system. It is about asking short questions, providing breaks when needed and doing interviews that do not require young people to give convoluted explanations about where they are and what they are doing. Basic communication awareness is about knowing to keep it as straightforward and as understandable as you can.

**Mr McCartney:** That awareness is now going across to the Law Society and the projects that it is involved in.

**Ms Jack:** The Law Society has been very supportive of us. It has facilitated conferences for us, including the one next week, which I hope some of you will be able to attend.

**Mr McCartney:** OK; a good pitch.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you. No one else has indicated. Thank you very much for coming along today. It has been very interesting and is much appreciated.