



IASLT | *The Irish Association of
Speech + Language Therapists*

Accessibility – Assistance Technology

Committee on Disability Matters: 6th October 2022

Submission from the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists.

Good morning,

Communication is a fundamental feature of humanity. The ability to communicate – to receive, process, store and produce messages – is central to human interaction and participation. It is also a fundamental human right. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and we, as a society, have a responsibility to ensure that every person has this opportunity.

My name is Muireann McCleary, and this is my colleague Dr Yvonne Lynch. We are here this morning on behalf of the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT), the recognised professional association of Speech and Language Therapists in Ireland. The IASLT is committed to playing its part in ensuring that the voice of people who have communication disorders is heard in our society. We would like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss communication accessibility and assistive technology with you today.

Communication is at the core of a person's participation in life. Children's developing communication skills enable them to learn, build relationships and access their community.

Communication skills are integral to adult relationships, at the core of social interaction and are an indicator in predicting a person's quality of life.



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Across the lifespan people with severe speech or language impairments may experience communication difficulties. Their natural abilities may not be sufficient to meet their communication needs, and they may rely on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, also known as AAC to communicate. Communication impairments may arise from a developmental disability such as cerebral palsy or an intellectual disability or from an acquired disability such as Parkinson's disease, motor neuron disease or stroke. Based on UK data which estimates that 0.5% of the population has a communication impairment resulting in a need to use AAC we estimate approximately 25,000 Irish people who have a significant communication disability may benefit from AAC.

AAC refers to various communication modes used to supplement or replace speech. These modes include communication boards, manual signs such as Lámh, and electronic devices with voice output. The currently accepted evidence suggests that there are no specific prerequisites (e.g., age, cognitive, linguistic, motor) for getting started with AAC.

AAC serves different purposes for different people. For those who have good understanding but who have a motor difficulty producing speech, AAC provides a mode of expression. For example, an adult with motor neuron disease might use voice output software on a laptop, phone or tablet. Others need AAC to support both their understanding and expression. For example, an adult with dementia may require picture symbols to support their understanding of health and care needs and their decision making. Finally, some people need multiple forms of AAC to support communication in specific circumstances or at particular times. For example, a child with Down Syndrome may use their speech and Lámh signs at home but use a communication book with less familiar people and might benefit from a voice output device in other settings. AAC may also support communication for individuals who are ventilated after surgery. AAC may be used at any stage of life and may be permanent or a temporary support. With this range of functions, it is clear that no one size fits all. People who use AAC are diverse and may need multiple technical



and non-technical solutions to access communication across contexts and communication partners.

AAC can have many positive benefits. It can allow people to control their world and to actively engage in society with significant long-term benefits for well-being, participation, and employment which extend beyond the individual. A UK report calculated that an appropriately prescribed and implemented AAC system that resulted in a young person taking up employment could result in a benefit of half a million pounds to the economy over a lifetime. Considering the potential benefits of AAC to individuals and to the economy, we must ensure everyone who needs them has access to high-quality AAC services. However, there are significant challenges in facilitating access to services and equipment for some of those who may benefit from AAC.

Irish people do not have equitable access to speech and language therapy supports and funding pathways to help them access the most appropriate AAC systems.

Waiting lists for speech and language therapy and other team support are critical issues. Addressing the long waiting times is a crucial resourcing issue requiring urgent action.

Speech and Language Therapists have a unique role in supporting people and their families to navigate the options and implement the most appropriate AAC systems.

In a recent statement IASLT highlighted the fact that specialist support pathways for AAC were to be established as part of the roll out of Progressing Disability Services. These services had previously been provided by specific client cohort focused services, or agencies had staff skilled in these areas who could provide the relevant supervision, support and training. Reconfiguration dismantled this structure. The promised specialist supports have not been consistently developed and in some cases, there is no local access to specialist supports for children and families. New pathways for clients to access specialist AAC supports is required. The introduction of clinical specialist speech and language therapy roles is also required.



There is no national framework for prescribing and funding of communication devices. We need a system that allows rapid access, including a loan model so that people can quickly access and try out different devices, to ensure they get the best system for their needs.

Providing an AAC system is only the start of the journey. SLT Intervention is required for the individual and for communication partners across all contexts; home, school, community, and employment. Without this support, AAC systems may be abandoned; costly in terms of assessment time, device cost, and ultimately quality of life, with opportunities lost through decreased communication and participation.

Social change is needed to ensure the equal and active participation of people who use AAC across all aspects of Irish society. This requires much broader change than AAC-specific services. We need to create an inclusive society that is accessible, so that people with communication challenges can fully participate. We have made some progress in this area. For example, there have been several initiatives across the country to design and install communication boards in playgrounds and other community spaces. These communication boards provide access to communication in public spaces while also developing a societal awareness that people communicate in different but equally valid ways.

We welcome initiatives like this while recognising that we have much to do in awareness building, advocacy, and training across all spheres of society.

October is AAC awareness month, and IASLT welcomes this opportunity to raise awareness of AAC and to offer our support in the implementation of the following steps toward a communication-accessible society for all Irish people who use AAC:

Recognition and implementation of communication accessibility for all in line with Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 21 protects the right of all people to communicate by whatever means, modes, or formats of communication are most appropriate to them, but lack of access to AAC and SLT mean that this right is not currently being upheld.



In order to make progress on this, both social and practical steps need to be taken.

IASLT recommends:

1. Changes in the provision of services

- Equitable access to speech and language therapy supports including specialist supports and pathways for AAC.
- A national framework for funding prescribing and funding of communication devices.
- Urgent action on staffing to address the long waiting times
- Provision of public services which are fully accessible to people with communication disabilities

2. Social and attitudinal change:

- Training required for those in service industries and community organisations to ensure communication accessible communities.
- A mass media campaign to raise awareness and advocate for communication accessibility.

