

Youth Justice Advisory group (YJAG) 2021-2027

The Background

IASLT holds that at present every Irish citizen with a significant communication disability is highly vulnerable to being excluded from due process

The background to an IASLT representative appointment on the YJAG by the Dept of Justice Appointment evolved from IASLT approaching the Department of Justice since 2017 to establish speech and language therapy services. IASLT has long identified the grossly inflated incidence of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCNs) among offenders and prisoners, as consistently borne out by a wide international body of evidence. Submissions have been made by IASLT to address the neglect of provision of communication supports for people with communication disorders across the judicial process at every level of the Criminal Justice System (CJS). These included pre-budget submissions, and a formal response to the Victims of Crime Act (CJ) 2017, demanding equal provision for persons with both developmental & acquired communication disabilities, with specialist services to avoid gross injustices. *Where a foreign language is deemed a barrier to communication, communication disabilities are NOT.* IASLT sought a mandate for provision of SLT for those with communication disabilities, in line with best practice and the tangible benefits of SLT in supporting effective communication in an information loaded legal system.

In **2018** at the IASLT AGM, a small group of therapists in public & private practice, committed to involvement with the CJS, formed a steering group, led by Maura Reynolds, following a call for SLTs to promote visibility of speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs) in Criminal Justice and work towards the development of Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services across the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

Primary concerns were based on how best to build awareness across the CJS on

(1) how **overt and hidden communication disability can discriminate against and disempower** all involved in the justice system, including victims of crime, young offenders, prisoners, Gardaí, probation, and all justice personnel they engage with.

(2) how **SLT can directly support justice agencies** to minimise these communication

barriers [Maura Reynolds (MR), Paula Bradley (PB), Karen Henderson (KH) Rita Treacy (RT)].

Role of SLT with victims:

- ✓ Assessing communication competence to testify
- ✓ Training Gardaí, legal and justice personnel to support communication
- ✓ Facilitating autonomous communication at all stages of the justice process



Role of SLT with offenders:

- ✓ Identifying communication disability
- ✓ Supporting understanding of the justice process
- ✓ Facilitating participation in verbally mediated rehabilitation

Education – Training – Assessment & Intervention - Support

2019 -2020 Initial recommendations were submitted to the Dept Justice from this group, including the following:

1. **SLT Taskforce;** *employ a special speech-language therapy taskforce* with a national screening pilot program, to establish a database quantifying prevalence and types of communication disorders and schedules of assessments & programs for needs identified.
2. **SLT assessment, support and intervention services** *employ specifically trained & experienced speech-language therapists SLTs* as forensic services develop across detention centres and prisons to provide a service to address speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) as part of a multidisciplinary clinical and educational team.
3. **Training programs** *employ a cohort of specialist SLTs in liaison with legal personnel, including garda and staff across the Irish CJS,* to develop and roll out education and training programs to judicial staff, depending on needs identified,
 - to assist them identify a wide range of communication disorders including hidden problems, and refer on where necessary
 - to support their understanding and success in communication exchanges and develop skills and materials for SLCNs as indicated.
4. **Advocating for INTERMEDIARY services** *to support the implementation and embedding of qualified intermediaries into court processes,* assessing and facilitating communication competency for testifying in the justice system. Enabling verbally mediated interventions and supporting equitable criminal justice outcomes.

2021 In response to these recommendations, the Department of Justice have stated that a taskforce or scoping exercises have lowest priority. They directed the group to build links with CJS agencies. The department does not engage directly with employing service providers, (similar to how the Department of Health funds service submissions from the HSE, Tusla, Charities and voluntary agencies). Only if CJS agencies identify SLT as a priority need, can service and funding requests be actioned.

2021 Appointment of IASLT representative (PB) on Youth Justice Advisory group YJAG

The IASLT continued approaching the government for over 3 years to establish speech and language therapy services and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the development of a new **Youth Justice Strategy for 2021-2027**. As a first major step forward in affording direct engagement with the Department of Justice, IASLT was invited to appoint a representative on a new **Youth Justice Advisory group (YJAG)**, set up in 2021 to advise the Minister of Justice. The YJAG is a multi agency group** (see membership agencies) **and SLT is the only clinical professional group invited to sit on this advisory group** and I was honoured to be appointed to represent the SLT profession and our stand for youth and adults with communication disorders who engage with the criminal justice system.

Over 5 years, including COVID years, the YJAG met only 10 times, initially through online meetings. This group holds a myriad of urgent, complex and interwoven agendas from contributing member agencies and is chaired by the Dept of Justice. The specific focus areas

of the YJAG where we can advocate **how and where people with Speech, Language and Communication Disorders** can be best served include the themes of collaborative & wrap-around supports, disability & neurodiversity, case management, transition to adulthood, education and alternative education/training, access to appropriate accommodations, listening to the voice of Child/Young Person, court processes.

2023 As IASLT representative, I was invited to present to the advisory group and to the youth justice governance group, on communication challenges for people engaging with the CJS. What stood out in their feedback was their **lack of awareness** on the range and impacts of communication disorders:

- many were not aware of language as an issue (comprehension and expressive difficulties) nor of the inflated incidence of speech, language & communication needs (SLCNs) in young offenders, nor how these can profoundly impact their confidence and competence.
- many were not aware of our contribution in supporting and minimising significant communication barriers for this population across the Irish criminal justice services.
- many were not aware of the SLT role in education & training across so many communication domains and across justice staff agencies.
- many were not aware of a key SLT role in social and cognitive communication areas

While dismaying, this feedback further highlighted the need for a continued committed and vocal approach for SLT services, forging openings to engage with service providers across the many agencies in the CJS, to share information & research findings and demonstrate the benefits, scope and nature of our SLT role in communication problems beyond 'speech problems', 'stammering' and 'hearing loss'.

*The small IASLT group continued to expand its networking, using every opportunity for input, at meetings of different justice agencies, interactions with Gardai, involvement with court process, and attendance at a number of forensic conferences and events. Of note for the group, was that **communication needs and problems were being constantly highlighted by youth justice agency members, but usually in the absence of reference to our profession.***

Possibilities arising from YJAG membership

While multiple important youth safety & support themes have been given priority, YJAG membership has provided a valuable access to justice staff, and the directors of services within the CJS, at different CJS discussion meetings. An invitation to present the case for SLT to the Youth Justice Governance group has led to forming links with the directors of Irish prison services, Irish probation services and Youth probation. Direct engagement with these CJS service directors has been invaluable in framing how CJS agencies will fund initial pilot projects with our profession, and, for the first time, pilot projects in both the Probation and Prison services are now being acted on. *With the support of forensically trained / experienced speech-language therapists, the roll out and evaluation of these pilot projects will crucially influence future SLT service developments.*

2021-2025 Forwarding the CJS Agenda (CJS SLT Group)

- Facilitating disability placements for Garda Specialist Interviewers (KH)

- Training initiatives for Gardaí (KH)
- Building the evidence base with valuable feedback from her innovative literacy research programs carried out in NI prisons (RT);
- Presentations to Justice agencies on the range of communication challenges facing youth engaging with justice, building awareness of cognitive- communication disorders (range of aetiologies eg ABI, autism) across the CJS with invitations for presentations at the youth justice governance group and probation services & annual youth diversion project conference (PB, NOK, KH).
- An invitation to the garda Youth Diversion Conference has also led to collaborating with Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice (REPP) group at University Limerick on content for their efficacy / outcome measures for youth in diversion projects.(PB, KH)
- Our SLT remit is evolving in response to the complex nature of justice agencies which is revealing, in dialogue and meetings, that taskforces or scoping exercises have lowest priority. CJS agencies opening opportunities to pilot and evaluate SLT assessments, interventions and training, will determine SLT value and relevance going forward.

2024 launch of the **Criminal Justice System SIG** within IASLT cjs.slt.sig@gmail.com

2021-2026 Important service initiatives

- A specialised flexible clinical service set up by Tusla, now employs SLTs in youth justice through ACTS - a small national clinical service, providing multidisciplinary Assessment Consultation, and focused interventions to young people with complex clinical needs or in transition from special care placements / detention, (including Oberstown Dublin & in Cork). <https://www.tusla.ie/therapy/our-services/#ACTS>
- Setting up and funding in 2022, of a professional Intermediary course at NUL (SLT & Law Depts) to assist with court processes A **national register for courts to access their service has now been set up**, assessment service begun and the intermediary scheme now being evaluated. <https://www.ul.ie/gps/courses/intermediary-studies-professional-diploma>
- The director of Youth Probation services is currently seeking funding for a **pilot SLT project with the development of senior SLT posts for supporting staff and youth in probation**
- The Irish Prison services Care & Rehabilitation Directorate are now **funding SLT assessment pilots** in male/female, mid and high security settings **across prisons in Ireland**. *With the work of forensically trained/experienced speech-language therapists, the roll out and evaluation of these pilot projects will crucially influence future SLT service developments across adult prison services.*

So slowly but steadily over the last 5 years, SLT as a profession, has begun to make a presence across the Justice system. The future is hopeful. So much work still to be done.

Paula Bradley

15/06/2026

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IASLT representative on Dept Justice Youth Justice Advisory Group

With huge thanks for all the voluntary committed trojan work, of all the founding CJS members - Maura Reynolds, Rita Treacy, Karen Henderson and to all SLTs on the steering committee, clinical development group, intermediary graduates, SLT CJS SIG committee and all SLTs who have generously volunteered their time and resources in moving this forensic agenda forward, with special mention also to Niamh O Keefe (NOK), Siobhan Mc Cullough, Robin Callaghan Creighton, and advisory SLT colleagues working in the CJS in UK.

Apologies to any SLT colleagues who have developed initiatives within YJS of which I am not aware.

Do contact me! paulabslt@gmail.com

*** Agencies represented on the Youth Justice Advisory group (YJAG) include Dept of Justice, Assessment Consultation Therapy Service (ACTS), Bar Council, Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN) Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) – Tusla, Children's Rights Alliance, Drugs Task Force, Education and Training Boards Irl, Empowering People In Care (EPIC), Garda Youth Diversion Projects, Immigrant Community Rep, Irish Assoc. of Speech and Language Therapists, Irish Local Development Network, Irish Penal Reform Trust, Law Society Juvenile Justice, Le Chéile Mentoring, National Children and Young People's Services Committees, National Disability Authority, National Youth Council of Ireland, NVR Ireland (Non-Violent Resistance), Parentline, Pavee Point, Restorative Practitioner/Expert, Univ Galway NUIG Lecturer and Family Research Centre NUI Galway, Univ Limerick, Univ Maynooth, Youth Advocacy Programme (YAP), YDP*
