

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair, Equality and Social Justice Committee
Welsh Parliament
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

MoJ ref: ADR106996

17th July 2023

Dear Ms Rathbone,

Welsh youth justice system: speech, language and communication needs

Thank you for your email of 3 July, highlighting the overrepresentation of children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in the justice system.

The disproportionality of individuals with SLCN in the justice system is an issue that needs our collective attention. Research has consistently demonstrated that a significant number of young people involved in the criminal justice system experience these difficulties. The impact of these challenges can be profound, hindering their ability to effectively engage with the legal process, understand instructions, and communicate their thoughts and experiences. Such barriers exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the principles of fairness in the justice system.

Recognising the importance of early intervention and support, the government is committed to addressing the needs of children and young people with SLCN. I note recommendation 3 in the Committee's report and will be interested to hear what comes out of the feasibility assessment looking at whether every police station could have an embedded NHS speech and language therapist (SLTs) in Wales. The National Health Service Liaison and Diversion (L and D) services also play a crucial role in identifying individuals with such needs and ensuring they receive appropriate support, and we are waiting to hear the findings of the evaluation looking at how these services are working for children across the country. An appropriate adult should also be in attendance whenever a child is in custody. Part of their role it is to protect the interests of the child and they should be aware of and able to support any learning and communication difficulties.

On recommendation 5, The Ministry of Justice published a six-month update to the Cross-Government Neurodiversity Action Plan on 25 January 2023. The update demonstrates the wide range of work that is in train to improve support for neurodivergent people in the criminal justice system. Most notably, we have introduced the Neurodiversity Support Manager (NSM) role in prisons. Over 100 NSM's have already been recruited and we are on track to have an NSM in all prisons in England and Wales by 2024. MoJ and HMPPS are also actively championing Autism Accreditation across the prison estate to make the prison environment more supportive for neurodivergent people. New neurodiversity specialist services

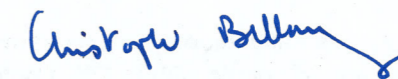
have been introduced in four probation regions, providing one-to-one interventions for people on probation and upskilling for probation practitioners to identify neurodivergent conditions. The MoJ is also working closely with health and justice partners, such as the police and the judicial college, to ensure that each stage of the offender journey considers neurodivergent need, including resettlement back into the community after serving their sentence. We are proactively working with Welsh Government colleagues to share best practice and identify further opportunities for engagement. We will publish a further update to the action plan this summer.

I also note recommendation 6 from the report regarding plans for embedding speech and language therapists within every Youth Offending Team in Wales by December 2023 and would be keen to hear more about progress on this. In England, the localised nature of service provision means that some Youth Offending Teams will have SLTs embedded in their service whilst others have outreach agreements with their community therapy teams. The Ministry of Justice-led Turnaround Programme has provided additional funding to Youth Offending Teams who can use the funding for local provision to support children, including commissioning or expanding the provision of SLT within the YOT setting, where appropriate.

To effectively tackle this issue, it is essential to foster partnership working between key stakeholders in both the UK and Welsh Governments. Collaborative efforts between these partners can facilitate the provision of SLTs to enable timely assessment, intervention and support to those who require it. We value the partnership between the Ministry of Justice, the Welsh government, and other relevant bodies, and we are committed to working together to ensure the provision of necessary resources for services.

By prioritising early intervention, strengthening liaison and diversion services, and fostering partnership working at local and national level, we can create a more inclusive and supportive justice system that empowers children and young people to reach their full potential.

Thank you again for raising this issue and I look forward to continued collaboration in this important area.



Lord Bellamy KC